

Corporate Assessment Report

December 2007



Corporate Assessment

Dorset County Council

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Introduction

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

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

- Ambition?
- Prioritisation?

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

- Capacity?
- Performance management?

What has been achieved?

- Achievement?

Considered against the shared priorities of:

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

- 3 Corporate assessments are normally aligned with a joint area review of services for children and young people (JAR). In practice this means that the Council's achievements in relation to children and young people are assessed using the evidence provided from the JAR. In addition, examples of outcomes and activity, which are relevant to the other themes and which are identified through the JAR, are considered within the corporate assessment.
- 4 The JAR covers 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 Dorset County Council is performing well. The Council's ambitions for the county are realistic but challenging and support the collective vision of the Council and its partners. The ambitions emphasise the importance of improving quality of life for residents by protecting and enhancing the natural environment while creating the employment and housing opportunities necessary to sustain economic prosperity. The Council's ambitions are based on a good understanding of the challenges facing the county and the needs and aspirations of residents. This understanding is supported by thorough analysis of statistical information and ongoing consultation.
- 6 Corporate priorities are clear. They achieve a good balance between addressing national issues and tackling the strategic challenges facing Dorset. Service and financial planning are aligned to secure a cohesive planning framework that supports delivery of the Council's priorities. The Council allocates resources to priority services to ensure that scarce resources are directed to priority activities. However the Council's approach to prioritising the needs of people at risk of disadvantage varies and it has yet to prioritise the specific needs of black and minority ethnic (BME) groups and migrant workers.
- 7 Community leadership is good. The Council successfully promotes the county's interests at national, regional and sub regional level. This has resulted in the economic development and housing needs of the county being recognised in the regional spatial strategy and attracting increased funding from the Regional Development Agency and Housing Corporation. The Council was also responsible for leading and resourcing the early stages of both the Jurassic Coast and 2012 Olympics projects. This success has resulted in positive international recognition. Locally the Council demonstrates a participative style of leadership for the Dorset Strategic Partnership (DSP) that promotes positive engagement.
- 8 The Council maximises service delivery from its current capacity. Roles and responsibilities are clear and governance and ethical frameworks sound. Relationships between councillors and officers are based on mutual respect and are courteous and open. Managerial leadership is good and policy direction is clear. Staff are capable and well motivated and are encouraged to be innovative and creative. Councillors and staff are encouraged to achieve their potential through good training and development opportunities.
- 9 The Council is performing well in securing value for money. It has responded to a challenging financial environment by creating a strong corporate focus on value for money that is linked to effective financial management. Savings and efficiency targets are ambitious but realistic and the Council has identified specific measures to halve a £20 million funding deficit over the next three years. It is confident that further efficiency reviews and capacity building will eliminate the gap by 2009/10.

- 10 Partnership working is effective. At the strategic level the DSP helps the Council to work in partnership with public, private and voluntary sector organisations to coordinate activity. Service delivery partnerships supplement the Council's internal capacity in key services such as transport, supported housing, highways and culture. Voluntary and community groups are keen to develop their partnership working with the Council.
- 11 The Council knows where it needs to improve. It used independent consultants to identify opportunities to build internal capacity and increase efficiency. These have been combined in the Council's organisational development programme known as '*Fit for the Future*'. Work streams include a strategic approach to social care commissioning, better use of computer systems and improved human resource management. It is also strengthening managerial leadership and political support to improve outcomes for children through better performance management. The Council recognises the need to improve its approach to diversity and its engagement with groups such as migrant workers and black and minority ethnic residents.
- 12 Access to services for residents is good and improving. The Council's website is informative, has good functionality and is supported by the availability of broadband connectivity throughout the county. The Council is also creating a customer contact centre, known as '*Dorset Direct*' to streamline telephone contact with the Council for residents.
- 13 There are clear links between strategic and service level targets and these inform individual and team targets. This makes it clear how individual performance contributes to achieving corporate objectives. Performance management systems help the Council and its partners identify good and poor performance and target corrective action as necessary. Data quality is generally good except in Children's Services and health where shortcomings limit the ability of the Council and its partners to monitor performance, evaluate outcomes and plan effectively. The Council is receptive to external challenge but councillors do not rigorously challenge performance outside of formal processes.
- 14 The Council delivers good services particularly in priority services. Standards and achievement in schools is good overall and the Council is working hard to improve performance in sixth forms. Land use policies and practices effectively reconcile the priorities of improving infrastructure and safeguarding the county's unique environment by supporting the provision of affordable housing and economic development where they are most needed whilst preserving the rural nature of the county elsewhere. The Council and its partners contribute to their shared priorities of maintaining the county as an essentially safe place to live where crime and the fear of crime is relatively low and life expectancy exceeds national averages. Service provision for older people is good and is integral to main stream services. However the Council has yet to produce and implement an older person's strategy. Residents' satisfaction with the Council overall has improved over the past three years and is now the highest rating of all county councils in the country. Similarly satisfaction with services such as planning, waste management, transport, culture and leisure facilities is high.

Areas for improvement

- 15 The Council needs to further improve its approach to diversity by:
 - placing greater emphasis on identifying and meeting the service needs of all groups at risk of disadvantage;
 - ensuring the workforce represents the local community at all levels; and
 - working with staff networks and external agencies to understand how to develop a more inclusive culture that welcomes and values difference.
- 16 The Council needs to encourage a culture of constructive internal challenge that goes beyond examination of performance monitoring information and identifies opportunities to maximise future improvement.

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	2
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

- 17 The county of Dorset is in the south west of England. It covers 2,542 square kilometres and borders Hampshire to the east, Wiltshire and Somerset to the north and Devon to the west. To the south are Bournemouth and Poole unitary councils and 142 kilometres of Dorset coastline. The district councils of Christchurch, East Dorset, North Dorset, Purbeck, West Dorset and Weymouth and Portland are in the county as are 156 parish councils.
- 18 Dorset is predominantly rural. Over half the area (55 per cent) is designated as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) exceeding both the national and regional averages of 15 per cent and 27 per cent respectively. Population density, at 158 people per square kilometre is less than half the national average of 379. In December 2001, 114 kilometres of the Dorset coast became part of England's first naturally occurring World Heritage Site when, with 41 kilometres of Devon coastline, it became the 'Jurassic Coast'.
- 19 Dorset has a population of 401,145. Its population has grown by 6.7 per cent since 1995, higher than the national average of 4.3 per cent. The most populous areas of Dorset are the coastal towns of Weymouth (51,880) and Christchurch (45,070) located in the south and south east of the county. The majority (98.75 per cent) of Dorset residents are 'white' with the biggest single group (96.78 per cent) being 'white British'. People from ethnic groups other than white live in the county in relatively small numbers. Statistically the largest group are of Chinese origin (0.21 per cent). In addition large numbers of gypsies and travellers frequent Dorset. The number of migrant workers has doubled between 2002/03 (620) and 2005/06 (1,280). Many of these workers come from countries recently admitted to the European Union, particularly Poland, and from South Africa.
- 20 The county has a large proportion of older people which is increasing. In 2005, 45.1 per cent of the population were over 50 and almost a third, 30.7 per cent were aged over 60. Both these figures significantly exceed the national averages of 33.4 per cent and 20.9 per cent. As life expectancy in the county exceeds the national average and the birth rate per 1,000 population is less than the national average (8.7 compared to 12.1) the proportion of older people is expected to continue to increase.
- 21 Average house prices in Dorset are among the highest in the country. In mid-2006 the average house price in Dorset was £247,946 - considerably higher than the national average of £166,690. Christchurch is the least affordable district in the country and Purbeck is rated the twenty-third least affordable out of 407 districts.

- 22** The Dorset economy is typified by approximately 15,000 small businesses each employing less than 25 people. Average earnings and unemployment levels are both low. Average weekly earnings are £416, below the national average of £452 and the regional average of £424 and unemployment is significantly below the national level of 2.5 per cent at 1.2 per cent. Employment in Dorset is largely service based with the most significant sectors being public administration (29 per cent); distribution, hotels and restaurants (27 per cent) and banking and finance (16 per cent). Tourism employs 10 per cent of the working population and attracts £643 million a year. This is expected to increase between now and 2012 when Weymouth will be staging the Olympic sailing events.
- 23** Residents consider protecting the environment, providing more affordable housing and managing population growth, particularly increasing numbers of older people, to be important issues.

The Council

- 24** Dorset County Council comprises 45 councillors. It is led by the Conservative group with 24 councillors. The Liberal Democrats have 16 councillors, Labour have 4 and there is 1 independent.
- 25** The Council uses the Leader and Cabinet style of governance. The Cabinet is made up of the Leader and five Portfolio Holders from the Conservative Group. Portfolios relate to Strategic Planning and Transportation; Environment; Adult and Community Services; Children's Services and Corporate Resources. The Cabinet is supported by the Community Overview and Performance Overview Committees and its decisions are scrutinised by the Audit and Scrutiny Committee. The Council also operates Standards, Accounts and Staffing committees and regulatory committees dealing with Planning, Licensing and Rights of Way.
- 26** The Council reorganised its senior management structure from 1 November 2006. The new structure provides for the Chief Executive to be supported by four Directors with responsibility for Adult and Community Services, Children's Services, Corporate Resources and Environment.
- 27** The Council employs 15,275 people representing 9,566 full time equivalent posts. It receives the lowest level of government funding per head of population in England. Its net revenue budget for 2007/08 is £212.4 million with £193.9 million of Dedicated Schools Grant giving an overall total of £406.3 million. This represents a 5.7 per cent increase over the 2006/07 figure of £384.3 million and required a council tax increase of 4.9 per cent (band D charge is £1,048.95). The Council plans to spend £55.9 million on capital schemes in 2007/08.

- 28 The Council works with public, private and voluntary sector organisations in a range of different partnerships. The Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) is known as the Dorset Strategic Partnership (DSP). It published its first community strategy in 2004. This was revised in early 2007 when the DSP published its new community strategy 'Shaping Our Future'. DSP works closely with the strategic partnerships of the six district councils and many other groups including Dorset Community Action, Dorset Race Equality Council and Rural Renaissance.

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

Ambition

- 29 The Council is performing well in this area. With its partners it has developed a shared vision for the county that links well to its own ambitions. Both the shared vision and the Council's ambitions are informed by comprehensive research helping the Council understand the needs of the communities that it serves. Despite this it is unclear how the Council will meet the needs of some groups at risk of disadvantage. The Council successfully promotes the interests of the county at national, regional and sub-regional level and demonstrates effective partnership working and good community leadership.
- 30 The Council and its partners share a realistic vision for the county. The DSP's community strategy *'Shaping our Future'* covers the period 2007 to 2016. It describes the shared vision for the partnership as being *'to build a living, thriving Dorset where everyone has a part to play in creating a better quality of life.'* The document identifies the key strategic challenges for the next ten years and describes how the DSP will work through theme groups to achieve its vision. Consequently the DSP is clear about what it wants to achieve and the challenges that it needs to meet.
- 31 The Council has a clear and challenging ambition that links to the shared vision. This ambition is to *'improve the quality of life for people in Dorset, now and for the future'*. The Council is clear about the strategic values that underpin its ambition and has defined six strategic aims (priorities) necessary to deliver the ambition and contribute to the work of the DSP. For each of these strategic aims the Council has identified short to medium term priority outcomes and clear performance measures. An important aspect of this is responding to the increase in the number of older people by continuing to integrate their needs into mainstream service provision. This defines a clear framework linking the ambitions of the DSP and the Council and the values and priorities necessary to deliver.
- 32 The shared vision and council ambitions are informed by comprehensive research. The Dorset Data Book is produced annually and contains valuable information about the demographic, social and economic make up of the county. This information is kept up to date by periodic revisions throughout the year. The Council is working with the Citizen's Advice Bureau and local churches to carry out research into the growing number of migrant workers in the county and carried out a survey with the Race Equality Council in 2003. It also publishes a monthly economic bulletin for Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole containing key statistics and details of current activity. Consequently the Council and its partners use comprehensive information to help inform strategic decisions.

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- 33** The Council's ambition does not meet the needs of some groups at risk of disadvantage. The ambition defines '*quality of life*' in terms that the majority of residents would recognise. It does not differentiate this definition from that which vulnerable groups such as single parents and some black and minority ethnic communities would wish to experience. Consequently it is unclear what difference achieving the Council's ambition will make to the lives of some groups at risk of disadvantage.
- 34** The Council successfully promotes the county's interests at international, national, regional and sub regional level. It was responsible for leading and resourcing the early stages of both the Jurassic Coast and 2012 Olympics projects and continues to actively support both these initiatives. It successfully influenced the development of the regional spatial strategy to secure support for the county's housing and economic development objectives and is working with Poole and Bournemouth unitary councils to develop a multi-area agreement as a framework for improving the transport network, economic prosperity and local skills base. The Council and its partners also secured Regional Development Agency funding for its rural renaissance project and attracted £22.2 million of Housing Corporation investment (an increase of 80 per cent over previous funding levels) for 2006 to 2008.
- 35** Strategic partnership working is effective. The Children and Young People's Plan, Single Implementation Plan for older people and the achievement of the health gain partnership in contributing to increased life expectancy in Weymouth and Portland are examples of the Council's involvement in successful partnership working. It is also working successfully with district councils to improve the availability of affordable housing and deliver projects such as the Weymouth Relief Road. The recently approved 'Pathfinder' project for enhanced two-tier working in the county seeks to replicate this success in other activities. The crime and disorder reduction partnerships covering western and eastern Dorset contribute to maintaining relatively low levels of crime and fear of crime. These examples demonstrate the Council's success in working in partnership.
- 36** The Council demonstrates good community leadership. It adopts a participative leadership style for the DSP which creates a culture of positive engagement and effective use of partner skills to produce improved outcomes. The Council also leads by example on issues such as tackling climate change and preserving the rural countryside. This illustrates the Council's ability to use the leadership style most likely to produce the desired outcome.

Prioritisation

- 37 The Council is performing well in this area. Its priorities are clear, informed by good public consultation and needs assessments and address national issues as well as the strategic challenges facing Dorset. Plans to deliver the Council's priorities are supported by detailed action plans with associated timescales and performance measures. The Council systematically allocates resources to priority services over time and involves stakeholders, including staff, to influence short term spending priorities.
- 38 The Council's corporate priorities are clearly stated in its corporate plan. They are:
- safeguard Dorset's unique environment;
 - improve life chances for children and young people;
 - help vulnerable adults to maintain independent living;
 - improve health, community safety and wellbeing;
 - improve Dorset's infrastructure and strengthen Dorset's economy; and
 - build a council fit for the future.

These priorities reflect national policy frameworks in relation to children and young people, vulnerable adults and community safety. The remaining priorities demonstrate the Council's commitment to tackling local issues by protecting the natural environment and developing the county's economy.

- 39 Priorities reflect the findings of needs analysis and consultation. The Council has carried out needs analyses in important service areas such as housing, economic development and adult social care. It supplements this information with good consultation and engagement with local people. Consultation takes place in a number of ways including a citizens' panel of 1,500 residents, focus groups to examine issues such as transport and waste management, a MORI residents survey every three years, the Dorset Hard to Reach and Traveller Forum, Older People's Forums, the Dorset Youth Council, and events such as the 'State of Dorset Debate on Children and Young People'. These activities inform the Council's choice of priorities by helping it understand the range and complexity of residents' needs.
- 40 The Council's approach to prioritising the needs of minorities and groups at risk of disadvantage varies. Its approach to addressing the needs of young people wishing to continue to live and work in the county, older people experiencing rural isolation and people with disabilities is based on a good understanding of need gained through positive engagement with these groups. Similarly its engagement with gypsies and travellers is constructive and has resulted in four permanent sites being set up for their use. Its efforts to engage with some black and minority ethnic groups have been unsuccessful and attempts to engage with migrant workers are at an early stage. As a result there is little differentiation of services for minority groups.

- 41 The Council is tackling the strategic challenges facing the county. The community strategy defines these as affordable housing, economic development, safeguarding the environment, Dorset's changing demography and access to services, employment and leisure. The Council's priorities refer to all of these challenges and action plans linked to the priorities describe how the Council will contribute to tackling them. Consequently the priorities and action plans in the corporate plan correspond with the key challenges described in the community strategy.
- 42 The Council has clear plans to deliver its priorities. The corporate plan defines priority outcomes and key performance indicators for each of the Council's corporate priorities. The plan continues to describe specific actions necessary to deliver each priority outcome with associated timescales and performance measures. At service level the adult and community services directorate plan refers to those elements of the community strategy and corporate plan to which the directorate contributes. Similarly the economic development strategy: '*Raising the Game*' identifies priorities and actions needed to realise opportunities and overcome barriers to economic prosperity. These examples illustrate how corporate and service plans support delivery of corporate priorities.
- 43 The Council's service planning and budgeting cycles are aligned and involve service users and other stakeholders. In November each year a preliminary budget position is prepared. This outlines the resources available for the coming year to inform service planning and is also the basis of consultation with staff and service users. During the budget consultation exercise in December 2006 participants wanted to protect services such as recycling promotion, youth recreation, support for vulnerable children, independence for older people, rural public transport and countryside access. As a result the final budget agreed in February included funding for an additional child protection officer, further support for public transport and extra money for recycling promotion. Service plans were changed to reflect the additional resources prior to their adoption in March. This process helps the Council direct resources to services important to stakeholders and ensures that service levels match budget allocations.
- 44 The Council systematically allocates resources to priority services. The medium-term financial strategy covers a three-year period and is refreshed annually. It reflects corporate priorities and is informed by the Resource Allocation Model which quantifies the impact of known variables such as inflation, population growth and volume changes in services such as waste management. Techniques such as zero based budgeting, efficiency reviews and activity based costing are applied to ensure that spending allocations reflect corporate priorities. This framework enables the Council to target efficiency savings at lower priority services and growth towards priorities. As a result resources available in priority areas increased by between 6.5 per cent and 8.5 per cent in the 2007/08 budget.

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

Capacity

- 45 The Council is performing well in this area. It is aware of its strengths and weaknesses and the need to build capacity. Leadership is strong and relationships between councillors and officers are good. Staff, although under pressure in some services, are well equipped to perform their roles. Scrutiny works well and the ethical governance framework is sound. The Council has a strong focus on value for money and good financial management. Partnership working is generally strong and the voluntary and community sector are keen to develop it further. Procurement, risk and project management are sound. The Council is improving its human resource (HR) management and corporate computer systems through its *'Fit for the Future'* programme. Workforce diversity is weak both in terms of numbers and in developing an inclusive culture.
- 46 Leadership is strong and provides clear policy direction. Relationships in the corporate management team and between officers and councillors are good and promote courtesy, openness and respect. Officers and councillors are clear about their responsibilities and decision making is open and transparent. Relationships between the unions and management are courteous and constructive. This creates a positive culture which helps support delivery of priorities.
- 47 Staff are competent, enthusiastic and well motivated. They cope well with capacity issues in some activities, notably Children's Services. Internal communication such as team briefings and the staff suggestion scheme encourage staff to be innovative and creative in suggesting ideas for service improvement. The staff panel influences important issues such as corporate values and revisions to the internal complaints procedure and staff are involved in determining short-term spending priorities through budget consultation.
- 48 The Council's governance arrangements are strong. Scrutiny has been assessed by the IDeA as exemplary. The Audit and Scrutiny Committee publishes an annual report to highlight its work in reviewing Cabinet decisions, investigating service delivery issues such as parking for people with disabilities and suggesting ways to tackle issues like budget shortfall. It monitors services through quarterly reports and investigates poor performance such as school absences. This means decision making is transparent and supports achieving priorities.
- 49 Risk management is sound. The corporate risk management group reports to the Corporate Improvement Board and Audit and Scrutiny committee. Strategic risks are linked to corporate priorities through the networked risk register and service risk profiles are updated annually in service plans. This means the Council links risk management with strategic and operational planning and decision making.

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- 50** Partnership working is strong but there is scope to make better use the voluntary and community sectors. Effective partnerships include working with the PCT to provide residential care flats; improving housing by working with district councils; involvement with groups directing the Jurassic Coast and 2012 Olympics and an innovative scheme with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra to promote music making for young and old people. However the Council could work more effectively with the voluntary sector. Overall partnership arrangements supplement the Council's internal capacity and provide improved outcomes for service users.
- 51** Project management practices are good. Project managers are trained in Prince2 and manage projects in a way commensurate with their complexity. The Council is recruiting project managers and has recently reinforced its corporate standards for project management in anticipation of its *'Fit for the Future'* programme. As a result key projects are delivered within expected timescales and budgets.
- 52** The Council uses good procurement practices. Its procurement strategy defines a clear corporate framework and training is readily available. Risk management techniques and equality impact assessments are included in all procurement projects. The Council hosts the south west centre of excellence and chairs the Dorset procurement partnership which includes fire, police and health organisations. Examples of effective procurement include a 25-year private finance initiative for street lighting that will achieve an 8 per cent cost reduction and the partnership between the Council's direct works organisation and its contractor that promotes seamless working and effective work practices.
- 53** Access to services is good and improving. The Council's website is informative, easy to use and has good functionality. The Dorset broadband project makes this a viable access option for many people and is well used. Physical access to services is facilitated by good schools and social care transport services which supplement public transport. The Council is on target to open its *'Dorset Direct'* contact centre in November 2007. The Council provides information in different formats including larger print, audio, video and different languages. Consequently it is becoming easier for residents to access council services.
- 54** Training and development opportunities are good. New councillors receive induction training and all councillors have appraisals every two years. These highlight training needs which are met by topic specific seminars; IT based training and one-to-one sessions. The Council has implemented a management competency framework for officers linked to training and development events. Consequently councillors and staff are supported in achieving their potential.
- 55** The Council demonstrates a clear and sustained focus on value for money (VFM). It delivers high quality education and environmental services at reasonable cost and is improving adult services from a relatively low cost base. It has achieved efficiency gains of £4.7 million in 2005/06, £1.6 million in 2006/07 and has plans to eliminate a £20 million funding gap over the next three years. These measures contribute to the Council achieving good VFM.

- 56 Financial management is strong. The Council has a good medium term financial strategy and manages its resources well in a challenging financial environment. It has achieved an overall score of three, 'performing well' for the past two years in the annual use of resources assessment. It agreed a balanced budget for 2007/08 and successfully reduced the estimated funding gap for the period 2007/08 to 2009/10 from £20 million to £10 million. It expects its annual programme of efficiency and other savings to deliver further budget reductions of at least £10 million to eliminate the funding gap by 2009/10. These measures illustrate how the Council is managing a challenging financial situation well.
- 57 The Council is working to build future capacity. Its *'Fit for the Future'* programme has identified where current practices could be improved. These include better integration of computer systems to improve functionality and management information while reducing duplication and maintenance costs; better strategic commissioning of services in areas such as adult social care and a consistent approach to HR management and work force planning based on a clear strategic framework, improved information and better trained managers. By improving in these areas the Council is well placed to increase efficiency and performance.
- 58 The Council is slowly improving its corporate approach to diversity in service delivery. It has achieved level two of the Equalities Standard and is working towards level three. Progress towards setting equality targets and resolving incidents of discrimination has been slow. Equality impact assessments are routinely done in some service areas and the Council is on course to roll this out to all services by 2008/09. This means that the Council is not yet consistently taking account of diversity, user focus and human rights issues in its services.
- 59 Workforce diversity is weak. Women are under represented at senior levels and the Council workforce does not reflect the local population. Support groups for people with disabilities, BME groups and lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and trans-gender (LGBT) staff have recently been formed but are at an early stage of development. The Council has yet to encourage their development and capacity so that the groups can support individuals and work with the Council to create a diverse organisation. This means the Council has yet to achieve an inclusive culture that values diversity and is able to understand the needs of its diverse population.

Performance management

- 60 The Council is performing adequately in this area. There is a clear structure of performance monitoring, reporting and review. However councillors do not consistently and rigorously challenge performance outside of formal procedures. The quality of data and targets varies. Feedback from service users and local people, including complaints, is used systematically to drive improvement. The Council is receptive to external challenge and organisational and personal development is supported through shared learning.

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- 61** Performance monitoring information is shared freely between the Council and its partners. A web-based information system is being rolled out to district councils and other partners. It reports progress towards partnership and LAA objectives. Action plans targeting under performance, such as the special education needs action plan, are developed with partners. In this way targets are transparent to stakeholders and there is shared ownership of actions and planned outcomes.
- 62** Performance management activity and resources are targeted on those areas where performance issues have been identified. The Corporate Improvement Board focuses on indicators in the bottom quartile to target improvement action. In addition the Community and Performance Overview Committees regularly review performance and identify areas where action is needed. Examples of improvements include eliminating a regular overspend on children's services and dividing the budgets for special education needs and transport to clarify the relationship between costs and performance. This helps the Council focus on those areas where improvement is most needed.
- 63** The Council has a strong track record of addressing underperformance. In 2005 adult services and environment each achieved a rating of two stars (one is the lowest and four highest). The Council took corrective action during 2006 to improve key indicators with the result that environment improved to a four-star rating and adult services to three. Similarly the Best Value User Survey in 2003 recorded a decrease in public satisfaction with the Council. It responded by tackling the reasons for this and the 2006 survey shows the Council as having the highest rate of improvement of all councils. Consequently the Council improves pockets of poor performance to achieve an overall high level of performance.
- 64** Performance monitoring processes are proportionate to risk and importance. Corporate performance monitoring processes use a 'litmus test' to identify the five poorest performing targets. Similarly financial monitoring focuses on high risk areas by identifying the 'top 20 demand led budgets'. These activities are reviewed frequently to enable prompt identification of problems and corrective action. This demonstrates a clear and appropriate focus on high risk areas.
- 65** Councillors do not consistently and rigorously challenge performance outside of formal procedures. Scrutiny works well but other councillors tend to react to instances of poor performance rather than actively seek opportunities for improvement. The Council recognises this as an area that it needs to improve and in June 2007 formed two overview committees to act as policy advisory groups. As a result action in areas such as tackling the Council's budget deficit and implementing strategic commissioning in adult social care have taken longer to introduce in Dorset than elsewhere.
- 66** The Council is receptive to external challenge and acts on external advice to improve performance. IDeA peer reviews and the use of external consultants to develop the '*Fit for the Future*' programme are examples of the Council seeking to improve and develop in response to external evaluation.

- 67 There are strong links between strategic and service level targets and individual appraisals and target setting. Links between strategic, directorate and service plans continue through to team and individual plans and make clear what each team and member of staff needs to contribute to meet departmental and organisational objectives. Key plans are monitored quarterly to ensure that links are maintained and exception reports focus attention where it is most needed. Similarly staff targets are reviewed through annual performance reviews to measure achieve and confirm continued alignment with corporate objectives. This helps focus effort on what is important.
- 68 Performance data is not collected systematically in Children's Services and health. The revised Children and Young People's Plan provides well-conceived targets which are monitored regularly. However many of the original targets were not precise and measurable meaning that, until recently, progress could not be demonstrated easily. The Council and its partners also have difficulty producing key performance information such as the incidence of teenage pregnancy. This limits the ability of the Council and its partners to monitor performance, evaluate outcomes and plan effectively in these important service areas.
- 69 The quality of targets is variable. Quantitative targets, such as those linked to financial performance and many performance indicators are readily understood, easily monitored and effective at guiding improvement. In contrast other targets are process focused and lack specific measures to judge progress making monitoring more subjective and less consistent. This makes it difficult for the Council to measure impact in all areas.
- 70 Service planning and targets are not systematically influenced by feedback from service users and local people. The stakeholder survey indicates the Council does not always involve service users, residents and partners in monitoring services. However, there are some positive examples of service user involvement; young people are used to routinely review service provision, and their feedback influenced priorities in the children and young people's plan. This means the Council is missing opportunities to improve some services.
- 71 Complaints are used systematically to improve performance. There are effective systems to collect and report complaints and these culminate in an annual report to councillors. In addition complaints are analysed to identify common themes, causes and potential preventative action. Corrective action taken as a result of this analysis includes a computerised correspondence monitoring system to reduce the time taken to deal with highways complaints, improved communication between service users, care management staff and finance staff in adult social care and increased staffing in the registration service to improve the response to telephone enquiries. Similarly learning from complaints is shared and used to improve performance in areas such as requiring committee recommendations to be supported by properly researched evidence and guidance on the way that CRB checks are carried out so as not to disadvantage people of no fixed abode. This helps services to learn from and improve in response to complaints.

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

- 72** Organisational and personal development is supported through shared learning. There is a range of mentoring within the Council, for customer service apprentices and as part of the management development programme. Learning is supported through managers' conferences, action learning sets, coaching training, and the corporate performance working group. The Council is also active in external networks, such as the support network for county councils. In this way the Council helps managers and staff develop their performance, individually and collectively, and learn from each other to support improvement.

What has been achieved?

- 73 The Council is achieving well. Its corporate ambition focuses on needing to secure a good quality of life for residents by protecting and enhancing the natural environment while creating the employment and housing opportunities necessary to persuade young people to remain in the county. It is working well to deliver this ambition and achieves a good balance between national shared priorities, with emphasis on children and young people, vulnerable adults and improving health and well being and locally determined priorities of safeguarding the environment and economic development.
- 74 Good service outcomes are achieved through clear ethical and governance frameworks which promote good professional relationships between councillors and officers. Managers and staff feel empowered and are committed and capable. Service priorities are clear. The Council works hard to maximise its existing capacity through good financial management, a strong focus on value for money and effective partnership working.
- 75 The Council is committed to building internal capacity and efficiency through organisational development. Through its *'Fit for the Future'* programme it has identified the need to improve its use of strategic commissioning in social care, its use of information technology and human resource management. Performance management practices lack robust challenge but promote identifying good and poor performance early.
- 76 The Council performs well in delivering local priorities. Its land use practices successfully reconcile the priorities of improving infrastructure and safeguarding the county's unique environment by supporting the provision of affordable housing and economic development where they are most needed whilst preserving the rural nature of the county elsewhere. Standards and achievement in schools is good overall and the Council is working hard to improve performance in sixth forms. The Council works well with the police to ensure that Dorset continues to be a relatively safe place to live and has made a good start to tackling health inequalities against a background of good life expectancy and health performance indicators being among the best in England. These actions support delivery of the Council's priority to improve health, community safety and wellbeing. The Council successfully integrates the service needs of older people in mainstream service delivery but has yet to produce an Older Person's Strategy to shape provision for the future. Service provision for older people beyond adult social care is good.

- 77 Residents' overall satisfaction with the Council has improved over the last three years. The BVPI User Survey for 2006/07 showed that 57 per cent of residents were satisfied with the Council overall. This compares favourably with 49 per cent in 2003/04 and was the highest rating for any county council as well as being the highest rate of increase. Residents' satisfaction with most services has also risen between 2003/04 and 2006/07. Levels of satisfaction with planning (91 per cent), civic waste disposal sites (80 per cent), buses (57 per cent), transport information (65 per cent), sports and leisure facilities (59 per cent), libraries (77 per cent) and parks and open spaces (74 per cent) have increased since 2003/04 and compare well with other county councils.

Sustainable communities and transport

- 78 The Council works effectively to provide employment land and premises. It manages the '*Property Pilot*' project, a joint venture with Bournemouth and Poole unitary councils, to maintain a land and premises database. The scheme has received 8,300 enquiries of which over 200 have resulted in the enquirer selecting the premises offered. The Council informs the regional spatial strategy by identifying land for economic use and helps district councils with employment land reviews to inform their local development frameworks. This activity identifies locations for business now and in the future and promotes economic growth.
- 79 The Council successfully promotes job creation. Through the Rural Renaissance Initiative it supports schemes such as *Women into Business* which resulted in 30 new businesses starting up in 2004/05 - *Fresh Start Academy* to provide training and support for 20 young people a year wanting to enter farming - *Dormen* provides mentoring support and has improved performance in more than 200 businesses and the *Poundbury Enterprise Centre* which hosts seven new businesses. The Council also promotes job creation in relatively high unemployment areas such as Melcombe Regis (by working with Jobcentre Plus) and in Ferndown and Verwood where it is working with the local employers forum to improve transport, training and recruitment opportunities. These initiatives illustrate how the Council is supporting job creation in the county.
- 80 The Council provides good strategic direction to improve the provision of affordable housing. It employs an affordable housing officer and allocates an annual budget of £150,000 to housing. Since October 2005 it has co-ordinated the activities of district councils (the statutory housing authorities) and improved the availability of strategic information and resources. Action taken to date includes a county wide housing needs survey, supporting a county wide housing market assessment and disseminating 'best practice' information. The Council has also helped secure an 80 per cent increase in funding from the Housing Corporation and influenced the regional spatial strategy to support affordable housing provision in the county. These actions are improving the strategic management of affordable housing provision in the county.

- 81 The Council and its partners are making good progress towards improving the availability of affordable housing. Through the affordable housing task group of the DSP the Council has completed a register of housing sites detailing the number and type of affordable units proposed. It is also compiling an inventory of publicly owned land that could be used for affordable housing. The group achieved its LPSA1 target to increase the supply of affordable homes and is re-investing half (£281,000) of the performance reward grant to progress its work programme including a reduction in the use of temporary accommodation by 65 per cent in the three years to 2009. The group is also actively supporting the creation of two community land trusts. As a result housing provision has improved and future opportunities identified.
- 82 The Council demonstrates good performance in waste management. It is currently self sufficient in terms of the landfill allowance trading scheme and is working with Bournemouth council to meet more stringent future targets. It has distributed more than 50,000 home composters and a further 200 are used in schools and other council sites. The Council promotes waste minimisation through awareness programmes including those to reduce unwanted mail and unnecessary packaging and promoting re-useable nappies. It has been best quartile for the percentage of household waste recycled (BVPI 82) in each of the three years to 2005/06 when it recycled 38 per cent and in 2006/07 it improved further to 42 per cent (subject to audit).
- 83 The Council is setting a good example in tackling climate change. It is working with the Carbon Trust and is on target to achieve a carbon reduction target of 11 per cent by 2010. The Council's works depot incorporates solar panels and a reed bed disposal system to recycle waste water. Similarly the design of the replacement Christchurch Junior School incorporates rainwater recycling, a sustainable urban drainage system and a biodiversity action plan.
- 84 The Council is making good use of public transport initiatives. It uses a variety of 'demand responsive' bus services to reduce rural isolation. Examples include local services such as in the Piddle valley to link villages to the town of Sherborne and a similar scheme in West Dorset centred on Beaminster. These supplement the county wide scheme which provided 146,000 customer journeys in 2006/07. The Council also operates park and ride in Dorchester (average 1,400 journeys a week) and an innovative scheme to provide scooters for young people to access employment and education opportunities. These examples illustrate how the Council is reducing rural isolation and improving access to employment and education.

Safer and stronger communities

- 85 The Council is working effectively with partners to reduce crime and the fear of crime. Dorset is a relatively safe area to live where crime is low and 97 per cent of people feel safe in the daytime. The Council has developed an evidence based approach to identifying relatively high hot spots of crime and allocating resources where most needed. This is helping to reduce anti-social behaviour and low level crime, particularly related to the night-time economy.

- 86 The Council is helping to reduce the impact of drug and alcohol misuse. Specifically the Drug Action Team is working with schools to make young people aware of the consequences of drug and alcohol abuse. It is also increasing the number of people receiving treatment for addiction. These efforts have been recognised by the 2006/07 Healthcare Commission Review which recorded a score of three - 'serving most people well' in this activity.
- 87 The Council is working effectively in partnership to reduce domestic violence. In 2006/07 partners successfully bid for specialist domestic violence court status. This means that specially trained magistrates and prosecutors deal with cases referred to the two special courts. Since 2006, Local Area Agreement targets have focused on reducing repeat incidents of domestic violence and on reducing alcohol related violent crime. These measures are supporting victims of domestic violence to report abuse and take action through the courts.
- 88 The Council works in partnership to reduce accidents. The level of road accidents has reduced from a relatively high level. People feel safer as a result of the Council working in partnership to achieve traffic calming in villages, improved street lighting and graffiti removal. This is as important as road safety in rural villages and is a high priority for residents.
- 89 Emergency planning arrangements are robust and rigorous. The Council's emergency arrangements enable the Council to respond to emergencies with its partners and communicate effectively with the public. It is involved in the Local Resilience Forum and has developed appropriate protocols.
- 90 The Council effectively promotes community cohesion. Community based initiatives such as 'rusty and not so rusty musicians' bring together young and old musicians and promote intergenerational understanding. Research with migrant workers is helping to build the Council's knowledge of issues that affect them. The Council supports a liaison group to develop mutual respect between settled and gypsy and traveller communities and to reduce tension. These initiatives promote a shared understanding of the needs of different communities and help integrate new and existing communities.

Healthier communities

- 91 The Council promotes a co-ordinated approach to reducing health inequalities across the county. The Council and its partners are delivering the public health strategy which has been in place since 2005 and is supported by a detailed action plan. Delivery of this action plan is the responsibility of a DSP theme group which co-ordinates the activities of the county council, district councils and primary care trust who comprise the Health Gain Partnership (HGP). Health indicators in the county are among the best in England and there is above average life expectancy for both men and women. The HGP is focused on addressing health inequalities in areas such as Weymouth and Portland where life expectancy is below the county average.

- 92 The Council and its partners are delivering shared action plans for improving health. Achievements include a healthy schools programme in all schools in the ten most deprived areas of the county, children's centres and surgeries in rural villages, health equity audits, sports college status for Weymouth school, action to reduce teenage pregnancies in Weymouth and Christchurch and a young persons exercise programme in Shaftesbury. These initiatives demonstrate the way that the Council and its partners work effectively on health improvement.
- 93 The Health Gain Partnership is promoting initiatives which are having a positive impact on health and wellbeing. In Weymouth and Portland life expectancy has increased since 1993 over and above the national trend, and over the same period the rate of coronary heart disease has fallen from twice the rate for England to below the national average. The number of people stopping smoking for the first quarter of 2007/08 has exceeded local targets and the number of smokers referred for advice on how to give up exceeds the average for the south west region.
- 94 The Council contributes effectively to partnership working to promote healthier communities. It provides dedicated support to the DSP from the adult and community services directorate and has funded research fellowships on topics such as sexual health, obesity and access to health services in rural North Dorset. It also contributes to specific issues such as reducing smoking by allowing libraries, schools, colleges and children's centres to be used as venues for smoke stop drop-ins.
- 95 The Council and its partners are tackling health inequalities for people at risk of disadvantage. They support the Health Living Wessex project in Weymouth and Portland. This project provides weight management, health at work, exercise referral programmes and opportunities for physical activity for people living in deprived wards areas. The development of children's centres in the county has also been phased to prioritise areas of need such as Bovington and Christchurch. The Council also supports an outreach clinic for rough sleepers and homeless people; community development workers undertaking health needs assessment for migrant workers; work to improve the health of people in prison and visits to gypsy and traveller encampments by midwives, health visitors and education support workers. These activities enable people from disadvantaged areas and groups to access health services.

Older people

- 96 The Council and its partners have a strategic focus on social care services for older people. The DSP recognise that the increasing age profile of the population is a key challenge for the county and has created a theme group to progress work in this area. This theme group is led by the Dorset Age Partnership with appropriate input from the Council, Primary Care Trust, Police and other agencies. Service delivery partners are developing a strategic approach to joint commissioning. However the focus of the group is health and social care and there is limited reference to the wider service needs of older people. Consequently the DSP is taking a narrow view of the needs of older people.

- 97 The Council is engaging well with older people. The county wide network of ten older people's forums is a useful source of information. These forums are independent and represent the views of large numbers of older people. Council officers attend forum meetings to present information, answer questions and listen to the views expressed. Older people are well represented on the citizen's panel and on focus groups researching specific service areas such as transport and waste. The Council successfully used their views when planning the Partnerships for Older People Project (POPPS) when it involved 30 partners on the steering group and spoke directly to 1,756 older people at road shows held at local markets. This contact promotes effective two way communication and enables older people to influence service delivery.
- 98 The older people's 'champion' successfully represents the views of older people to the Council. He attends forum meetings and other events involving older people. He is approachable, articulates the views of older people at council meetings and investigates specific issues and problems. His activities help the Council understand and consider the views of older people when taking decisions.
- 99 The POPPs project is successful. The Council received £2.4 million of funding from the Department of Health to develop supportive communities for older people. It has used this money to employ over 100 local older people to provide signposting, support and advocacy as well as consulting with local people on the provision of local services. POPPs also provides funding for projects such as '*sloppy slipper*' exchanges, '*anyone for lunch*' a cooking and eating together project, community lunches and tea dances. This work is making a real difference to older people's ability to manage and remain independent.
- 100 The Council tailors service provision to meet the needs of older people, both through its own services and in partnership with other organisations. Examples include opportunities for older people to learn computer skills, home delivery of library books, demand responsive bus services in rural areas, mobile library vehicles visiting residential care homes and volunteers helping older people to trace family histories. The Council also works closely with district councils and the Department for Work and Pensions to facilitate access to state benefits for older people and promotes a multi agency approach to the provision of supported housing by working with the primary care trust, registered social landlords and other agencies. These examples illustrate how the Council meets the service needs of older people.

Children and young people

- 101** Outcomes for children in the Dorset area are generally adequate and there is good potential to improve. Performance in relation to enjoying and achieving is good. Children enjoy school and generally achieve. Children and young people who are looked after by the Council are making good progress in their education compared to national averages. Children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities achieve good outcomes. Children are safe and the safeguarding arrangements are effective. With the exception of the Weymouth and Portland areas, children and young people are less likely to become teenage parents than anywhere else in the south-west region. However, in Weymouth and Portland the rate of teenage pregnancy remains unacceptably and consistently high. The Council continues to make a good contribution towards the health of children and young people in the area and healthy lifestyles are promoted. Children and young people are helped to make a positive contribution and there was good evidence of them being involved in regular consultation, service design and in the recruitment of staff. The youth service supports young people well in their social and emotional development and in their ability to develop positive relationships with others. The Council is making a good contribution to improving the ability of children and young people to achieve economic well-being. It has clear plans for improvement and the Council is providing clear strategic leadership where necessary.
- 102** The DSP's community strategy and the Children and Young Person's Partnership Plan (CYPPP) set out a common vision that children and young people should be at the heart of each partnership across the area. The CYPPP sets out a clear strategy and ambitious targets to improve services and outcomes for children. It incorporates a range of smart targets to enable better and more effective implementation and evaluation, reflecting an increasing commitment to evidence-based continual improvement. However, the last year has been typified by inconsistent progress, in part caused by the complexities of establishing strong and effective partnerships and an integrated children's service, but also because of a lack of a consistent approach to gathering and to using data and management information effectively. Despite these challenges, good value for money has been achieved, for example in relation to reducing school surpluses, and better use has been made of consultation with children, young people and their parents and carers. Progress has been made in organising local services to ensure that difficulties are identified earlier and services are matched to need in a timely way.
- 103** The 2007 APA states that the Council makes an adequate contribution to securing the safety of children and young people. Although the 2007 joint area review found some evidence of good practice, for example services to children living on traveller and gypsy sites and those affected by domestic violence and bullying, it also concluded that safeguarding services were adequate overall. Initial and core assessments, although completed more often within the statutory timescales, were of variable quality, with wide variation in clarity, accuracy, analysis and completeness. Techniques to evaluate and monitor service quality were undeveloped.

- 104 Looked after children have benefited from improved placement stability over the last year, with proportionately more children living in stable, long-term placements than is the case nationally. However, permanence planning arrangements are confused, thereby raising the risk of children and young people not benefiting from long-term security that should be available to all who enter the care system. Looked after children, helped by a tuition team, achieve better outcomes from education and training than is the case nationally, but personal education planning methods are underdeveloped and too many experience periods of fixed term exclusion. Health needs are monitored effectively by a dedicated team, ensuring good access to specialist services, including CAMHS, when required.
- 105 Children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities benefit significantly from early identification of health, care and education needs. This contributes to the majority of children and young people being increasingly included and achieving well at school. When necessary, they are effectively safeguarded and because of established transition planning, good rates of progression to post-16 education, employment or training are achieved. However, some children experience inconsistent access to therapy services and CAMHS provision, and parents of those children with the most complex needs are often frustrated by the lack of access to appropriate services, including respite care. Parents consider that these services are not always set up for those with the most profound or specialist needs.
- 106 The 2006 and 2007 APA letters drew attention to the need to reduce the rate of teenage conceptions. Although the rate of teenage pregnancy remains low across the county as a whole, the rate in Weymouth and Portland remains stubbornly high. A considerable number of initiatives have been implemented but their effectiveness and impact has not been measured due to the absence of robust data and evaluative mechanisms. This has meant that the most successful have not been identified and rolled out further to increase their effectiveness. Maternity support and provision for expectant mothers is good despite the acknowledged complexities in delivering services to rural areas. Inter-agency work 'on the ground' to improve the sexual health of young people is committed and some of it is good. However, in the absence of a comprehensive needs analysis, the council and its partners cannot be sure that services are reaching those most in need.
- 107 The capacity of the Council to improve is good. Good and strengthened managerial leadership and political support are driving the ambition to achieve excellent outcomes for all children living in the Dorset area. Good plans, which have largely secured resources and are aligned with funding priorities, a good and highly committed workforce, an increasing understanding of weakness coupled to an awareness of what needs to be done to improve data management and performance management will support the delivery of the strategic plans in the short- and longer term.

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 Dorset County Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 3 September 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.