

Corporate Assessment Report

February 2008



Corporate Assessment

St Edmundsbury Borough Council

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Introduction

- 1 Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) is the means by which the Audit Commission fulfils its statutory duty, under section 99 of the Local Government Act 2003, to make an assessment and report on the performance, of local authorities. Corporate assessment is one element in the overall assessment that leads to a CPA score and category.
- 2 The purpose of the corporate assessment is to assess how well the Council engages with and leads its communities, delivers community priorities in partnership with others, and ensures continuous improvement across the range of Council activities. It seeks to answer three headline questions which are underpinned by five specific themes.
 - What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?
 - Ambition
 - Prioritisation
 - What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?
 - Capacity
 - Performance management
 - What has been achieved?
 - Achievement and Improvement

Executive summary

- 3 St Edmundsbury Borough Council has made very good progress since its last CPA inspection in 2004, when it was assessed as good. It is now an excellent Council.
- 4 The Council is ambitious for the borough and is working effectively with partners and stakeholders to achieve its vision. It considers partnerships to be vital in achieving ambitions. Stakeholders are valued and all levels of partnership are nurtured; whether regional, strategic, or from local communities. The Council is using all partnerships to build their capacity and deliver outcomes for the community.
- 5 The Council is providing effective strategic and community leadership. Officers and councillors are clear and enthusiastic about their role in delivering improvements across the borough and the region. The Council is highly committed to improving quality of life for local people. Partners and stakeholders talk about the commitment and passion shown by officers and councillors in working with them to achieve positive outcomes within the community.
- 6 Priorities are clearly aligned to national, regional, and sub-regional priorities. Local objectives take these into account while reflecting local need. The Council is working well with most communities and groups to set priorities and investment levels. However, it recognises that further work is required to use the available data to set outcomes for some hard to reach groups and those at risk of disadvantage.
- 7 Capacity within St Edmundsbury is strong and has been an area of focus since the last CPA. The Council has reviewed systems and implemented changes to ensure that it has sustainable plans which are supported by financial and human resources. The Council has recognised that it has set stretching ambitions and targets and is supporting its staff through flexible working options and staff wellbeing programmes.
- 8 Performance management is strong and has significantly improved since the last CPA inspection. Comprehensive frameworks are in place to ensure that officers and councillors' challenge and monitor financial and service performance. Service reviews have led to process re-engineering which has improved service performance and outcomes for users.
- 9 The Council is achieving recognisable outcomes against its corporate priorities. Using its strong approach to partnership, the Council has been able to secure major investment which is leading to regeneration and growth across the borough. Through a range of initiatives it has effectively targeted vulnerable groups such as those with a disability, the young and elderly, to improve their wellbeing and safety.

Areas for improvement

- 10 To ensure that outcomes are tailored to the needs of all parts of the community, the Council should develop a more systematic approach to equality and diversity. In doing so, it should ensure that it uses differentiated data to better understand the communities it serves and use this to set priorities and identify agreed outcomes for specific groups.

Summary of assessment scores

Headline questions	Theme	Score*	Weighted score
What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?	Ambition	4	8
	Prioritisation	3	6
What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?	Capacity	4	8
	Performance management	4	8
What has been achieved?	Achievement and Improvement	4	28
Weighted score			58
CPA category			Excellent
<p>*Key to scores</p> <p>1 – Below minimum requirements – inadequate performance</p> <p>2 – At only minimum requirements – adequate performance</p> <p>3 – Consistently above minimum requirements – performing well</p> <p>4 – Well above minimum requirements – performing strongly</p>			

**Banding thresholds for determining CPA category

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

Context

The locality

- 11 The borough of St Edmundsbury is located in the west of Suffolk County in eastern England. It lies at the centre of a triangle created by Cambridge, Ipswich and Norwich. The borough covers an area of 657 square kilometres with two major centres; Bury St Edmunds, and Haverhill. Half the population is concentrated in these centres, with the remainder of the borough being rural in character. Bury St Edmunds has been a prosperous sub-regional centre for centuries providing a range of market, shops, cultural and leisure facilities which act as a draw to the surrounding region. In contrast, Haverhill is largely industrial in nature and grew rapidly from the London overspill programme.
- 12 There are approximately 101,900 people living in St Edmundsbury with a lower than average population density of 1.5 persons per hectare. The borough has a black and minority ethnic (BME) population of two per cent, which is lower than the county and national figures. The BME population is spread throughout the borough and there is no geographical concentration of particular minority groups. In addition, St Edmundsbury has approximately 9,000 United States air force personnel within their community. In recent years there has been an increase in the number of migrant workers in the borough in particular from Eastern Europe.
- 13 Unemployment is 4 per cent, which is below the regional average of 4.5 per cent and the national average of 5.3 per cent. However, gross weekly pay of workers living in the area is lower than regional and national averages at £384. The working age population for the Borough is 60.5 per cent, which is lower than the 77.5 per cent in employment in the Eastern region and nationally.
- 14 The borough has a higher than average proportion of the population aged over 50 years. The proportion of residents over 65 years has increased in the last five years to 17.4 per cent in 2006 and forecasts suggest this rate will increase in the next ten years.
- 15 House prices are above county and regional levels, with the average house price at £218,280. There is pressure to provide increased affordable housing units: 95 affordable dwellings were completed or acquired in 2005/06, which was a significant increase on the previous year of 34. Home ownership in St Edmundsbury is 83 per cent private sector and 16.2 per cent registered social landlord housing. The Council undertook a stock transfer of 5,650 properties in 2002 to Havebury Housing, who is their largest registered social landlord.
- 16 The area is generally affluent, ranked towards the bottom of the deprivation scale at 267th out of 354 local authority areas nationally. No areas in the borough fall within the 10 per cent or 25 per cent most deprived areas in the county. However, there is localised deprivation within certain estates. Rural isolation and poor access to services are a problem in some areas.

- 17 Recorded crime in the borough is lower than national and regional figures, although there was an increase in from 39.2 (per 1,000 population) in 2003/04 to 45.7 in 2005/06. Overall fear of crime in all categories is below the average for England and Wales.

The Council

- 18 The Council comprises 45 councillors of which 36 are Conservative, 3 Labour, 3 Liberal Democrat, and 3 Independent. There has been a majority Conservative administration since 2003. There has been a leader and cabinet model in operation since 2002. The following committees operate: overview and scrutiny; performance and audit scrutiny; policy development; standards; development control; licensing and regulatory; officer appointments; and staffing appeals. Other committees and working groups are convened to address specific issues and projects such as the Cattle Market redevelopment in Bury St Edmunds.
- 19 The Council employs 505 full time equivalent posts. The corporate management team (CMT) comprises the Chief Executive and three corporate directors responsible for environment, resources and community. These are supported by nine heads of service.
- 20 The Council has a net revenue budget of £12.8 million for 2007/08 and a stretching capital programme of £34.6 million. They have received the highest increase in Suffolk for average Band D council tax at 4.8 per cent in 2006/07.
- 21 The Western Suffolk Local Strategic Partnership (WSLSP) is chaired by the Leader of St Edmundsbury Borough Council and includes the neighbouring authorities of Babergh District Council and Forest Heath District Council. In addition to its strategic partnership with Havebury Housing, the Council entered into a partnership to deliver its leisure services via Abbeycroft Leisure Trust, in 2005. It is also utilising a number of other partnership arrangements to deliver its large regeneration projects.

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

Ambition

- 22 The Council is performing strongly in this area. It has a clear, shared vision for the borough. Its ambitions are communicated, agreed and understood by stakeholders and partners. The community strategy vision 'to make life better' is actively supported by the borough through its leadership of the WSLSP. Following extensive consultation and analysis of local needs, the vision has been translated into four cross-cutting initiatives supported by clear action plans.
- 23 The Council's ambitions reflect regional and local need. Through consultation, the analysis of performance information and discussion with partners and the community, the Council is clear on what matters most to those within the borough. As a largely rural borough, issues around rural isolation within all communities remain a challenge. An aging population and a lack of perceived opportunities for the young, add to this isolation. They have identified the need to proactively embrace the growth agenda to create a prosperous and sustainable economy for current and future communities. However, in order to deliver this they recognise that housing needs to become more affordable. All of this is to be delivered in a way that the attractive environment, of which the borough is proud, is sustained for the benefit of all communities. Internally, since the last CPA in 2004, the Council has strengthened and invested in their capacity and working with partners and as a result are achieving improvements in services, whilst improving efficiencies and value for money for the people of St Edmundsbury.
- 24 The community strategy sets out the community ambitions which form the basis for effective partnership working between the Council and its partners, which includes Babergh and Forest Heath district councils. These ambitions are:
- maximise the potential of all children and young people;
 - develop and maintain a safe, strong and sustainable community;
 - create and support healthier communities; and
 - develop a prosperous and sustainable economy.

The Council's ambitions clearly flow from these sub-regional ambitions.

- 25 The Council's ambitions provide long, medium and short term focus for activities to be delivered via a range of plans and partnerships. The Vision 2025 sets the change programme for the long term. It was developed following consultation during 2005 with partners, voluntary and community groups, public meetings and a competition for children. Vision 2025 provides a shared vision for the future of the borough and has clear links to the community strategy. The long term vision is translated into medium term outcomes via the corporate strategy 2007 - 2017 and into the annual cabinet commitments and statutory and non statutory plans. These corporate targets are also used to inform the personal development programmes for officers and councillors.
- 26 The ambitions for the community are shared and understood by partners. The Council is using its partnerships effectively to deliver its ambitions for the community. For example, working with the Police and WSLSP on the 'respect alcohol, respect yourself' theme via the 'put a cork in it' campaign which runs from January 2007 to December 2008. The campaign has included bar staff training, door supervisor training, education, and alcohol workshops with vulnerable young people, and is supported by Trading Standards and Police who are targeting the sale of alcohol to underage groups. Partners, officers and councillors understand the links between their plans and strategies in delivering ambitions for the community.
- 27 The Council is exploring the future provision of shared services to improve service efficiency. It is taking the lead on the creation of the Public Services Village (PSV) in Bury St Edmunds which will see borough and Suffolk County services provided in one location. It is also anticipated that the Primary Care Trust and Police will relocate offices onto the site. This will provide a more streamlined service for users, increase capacity as well as improve efficiency for both councils. The building will meet the Building Research Establishment Environmental (BREEAM) standard for environmental efficiency which itself reduces the running cost of the building. In addition, the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) have identified the work being undertaken with the PSV as demonstrating excellent partnership working. It is proactively working with partners to deliver its ambitions for economic, sustainable growth.
- 28 The Council is providing good community leadership. It understands the scale of current and future social, economic and environmental challenges across the area, and uses this information to establish stretching ambitions. For example, the Council has recognised the need for more houses and employment in the area, and is awaiting the results of growth bid and pathfinder applications in order to support this. They have responded to consultation with new migrant communities by providing Polish, Portuguese and Russian access to service guides. They are also tackling wider community issue of rural isolation through implementing the rural action plan and close working with parish councils. They are ensuring that their ambitions reflect the diverse communities they serve and the changes that are taking place in these communities.

- 29 Ambitions are being translated into outcomes for the community. Working with partners the Council has defined SMART targets to improve community safety and wellbeing, affordable housing, and economic development in line with its ambitions, whilst maintaining an attractive and sustainable environment. It has established roles and responsibilities through a range of joined up strategies such as the community strategy, local area agreement, economic development strategy and the local plan. The Council's ambition to improve safety and wellbeing of vulnerable people is being achieved through a number of partnership projects. In particular, they are working with parish councils, developers and housing associations to provide suitable accommodation for elderly people within their existing local community. For example, working with Suffolk County Council, Ixworth Parish Council and two social landlords the Blackbourne View scheme provides suitable accommodation for 66 elderly residents within their existing community. The draft Suffolk climate action plan includes clear shared targets and baselines. The Council and partners have clear roles and responsibilities in delivering the ambitions which give accountability to ensure that outcomes achieved in the short term are sustainable.
- 30 The Council's ambitions are informed by good consultation with partners, stakeholders and communities. The ambitions for the borough have been shaped through consultation with communities via Community Spirit magazine, feedback from the WSLSP and Youth Forum; work with partner organisations and data analysis. The Council has consulted with groups at risk of disadvantage; following a review of findings from surveys the Council worked with partners to hold two extra focus groups with the Portuguese and Polish communities. Partners state that they are well informed and that the Council has actively engaged them in shaping the major developments which are occurring in the borough. For example, town centre businesses are regularly updated and consulted during the development of the Cattle Market. The Council has also facilitated meetings between businesses and developers to address issues such as car parking provision during construction. The approach provides a consistency in understanding across partners of the future ambition for the area.
- 31 The Council communicates effectively on its ambitions to councillors, staff, local communities and other stakeholders. Councillors are clear about their own roles and are enthusiastic about achieving ambitions they have set themselves in their cabinet commitments. These include the rural action plan, redevelopment of the Bury town centre and the £10 million Haverhill master plan. The Council has a range of externally focussed communications which are published on a monthly, bi-monthly and quarterly basis. The Council tailors communication to the needs of its communities. For example, providing a rural news publication specifically focused on locally identified parish council issues, whilst the town centre newsletter is emailed on a monthly basis to over 2000 individuals and businesses. Staff receive weekly e-briefings in addition to their team meetings and councillors are also provided with weekly updates. The approach to communication gives a framework for the Council to provide community leadership across partners, stakeholders, community and internally.

- 32** The Council and its partners have ensured that ambitions are realistic and sustainable. They have an ambitious capital programme which supports the economic growth ambitions of the Council. The delivery of this programme is largely reliant on the efficient disposal of a range of assets, so in order to obtain the highest value the Council are selling assets with outline planning permission. The Council has set themselves stretching targets against their affordable housing ambition. To facilitate the achievement of this, the Local Plan sets out clear mechanisms to maximise housing delivery and affordable housing, such as the structured release of greenfield sites. Supporting policies set out their approach to maintaining affordable housing in perpetuity. As a result of the commitment to its decisions, the Council has exceeded its annual target for housing delivery and in particular, affordable housing units completed.

Prioritisation

- 33** The Council is performing well in this area. It has clear priorities that are based on local need and consultation with the community and partners. The Council is clear on what matters to local people and this has informed their community ambitions and priorities. It has allocated resources in line with priorities. Through its work with partners and consultation with community groups, the Council is ensuring that it understands its minority groups and those at risk of disadvantage and that priorities take account of these needs.
- 34** The Council has reflected its ambitions for the community in their corporate priorities. The four priorities are:
- improving the safety and wellbeing of the community;
 - securing a sustainable and attractive environment;
 - creating a prosperous local economy; and
 - raising standards and corporate efficiency.

These priorities link to the ambitions set out around rural isolation, young and elderly groups within the community, economic growth, housing growth and improving internal processes and capacity. There are clear links into the community strategy, Vision 2025, cabinet commitments and cascade from the corporate plan into service plans and individuals targets as set out in personal performance development reviews (PDR). Targets and measures are in place to monitor delivery of the priorities and these are reviewed annually through the business planning process.

14 Corporate Assessment | What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?

- 35 The Council is a facilitator within partnerships to deliver outcomes and provides clear guidance on partners' roles and responsibilities in delivering priorities. Key strategic partners, such as the Suffolk LSP and WSLSP, have clearly articulated roles and responsibilities through allocation of lead roles for cross-cutting projects. All partners were positive about the way they work with the Council. In particular, they state that they are encouraged to develop, present and take the lead on projects which are then supported rather than being Council-led. The Council has set challenging priorities which are closely linked to those of their partner organisations. They are working effectively with Abbeycroft Leisure Trust to deliver their priorities of community wellbeing and the WSLSP 'get western Suffolk active' programme. For example 12 community outreach events, entitled 'whatever the weather', for children across the borough during 2007 reached 549 children between the ages of five and 13 years at nine venues. Other partners supported the events including the Suffolk Police Safer Neighbourhood Team, Suffolk Football Association Skills Team and the Fire Service. The Council's open approach to communicating and engaging with partners means that all parties can be clear how they are contributing to the achievement of priorities.
- 36 The Council is clear about what are and what are not priorities. Its priorities have been identified through research, consultation and data sharing with partners and link to those set out in the community strategy. Priorities are translated into specific action plans and progress towards these is monitored and shared with key partners. The Council uses their DR-IVE (dynamic review-innovation, value, enterprise) programme to identify areas of dis-investment and efficiency savings. The programme considers a range of factors including links to corporate priorities, community impact and risk before categorising savings and disinvestment A to D. For example they have disinvested in the animal warden service as a result of the DR-IVE programme. The Council is willing to make difficult decisions on areas of disinvestment such as, the closure of the Manor House Museum. Following a scrutiny review which found a high cost per visitor and that the building was not fit for purpose, the decision was taken to close the museum and relocate the exhibits to the town centre museum, Moyse's Hall and purpose-built storage and study centre at West Stow.
- 37 Resources are allocated to priorities in the short, medium and long term. The Council has had policy-based budgeting in place for five years and medium-term corporate, finance and service planning is carried out on this basis. Medium-term service plans look forward four years and closely tie in with the five-year financial model. Asset and capital management are being used to deliver corporate priorities and the achievement of outcomes from capital projects is evaluated. The DR-IVE programme is used to outline savings and growth options which are considered by the Policy Development Committee and Council in the budget report. As a result of findings from these reviews and community consultation, the Council has re-allocated resources. For example, investment has been moved from recycling, now that the service is performing at 50 per cent, and focus has turned to litter and cleansing which is aligned to their sustainable and attractive environment priority. Outcome-focused service delivery and action plans are in place to support the delivery of projects and these include short, medium and long-term targets.

- 38** The Council has a good framework for ensuring that priorities are cascaded throughout the organisation. Statutory and other plans link together. For example, the people strategy is clearly linked to priorities and it sets out organisational competencies, as well as outlining the key links to priorities to be included in personal action plans. Progress is monitored through the Performance Development Review process. The strategy is translated into action through the workforce development plan 2005-2009 and progress is reviewed annually by Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Overview and Scrutiny work proactively to identify improvements. For example, following work commissioned by Overview and Scrutiny on the evening economy, the Council is sharing information with the Police on the location of licensed premises, crime and noise incidents to build up a map of 'hot spots' which will be used to update the Licensing Statement of Policy. The findings from this have also been incorporated in the wider 'put a cork in it' campaign which is running within the borough. All levels within the organisation are clear how they contribute to the delivery of the Council's priorities.
- 39** The Council takes an inclusive view of its communities when setting its priorities. It has clear plans to address the needs of those with disabilities, those at risk of rural isolation, migrant workers and gypsy and travellers. Service areas are making changes to address these needs, such as using pictures to explain what materials to put in bins for those with low literacy skills, learning disabilities or migrant workers. It is undertaking analysis of data by user group, and equality and diversity assessments and this is included in the business planning process, in project plans, business cases and in action plans. The systems and processes for ensuring the Council understands the needs of their diverse communities are largely in place. However, it does not consistently differentiate data across all community groups. Therefore it cannot demonstrate that its priorities meet the needs of all members of the local community.

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

Capacity

- 40 The Council is performing strongly in this area. Capacity is enhanced through public, private, and voluntary and community sector partnerships which are used effectively to deliver outcomes at a local level. It has very effective managerial and political leadership which is supported by transparent decision making arrangements. Financial processes work well and these are enhanced by an innovative approach to efficiency and value for money. Councillor and officer capacity to deliver the Council's ambitions is strong, with good training provision. The Council anticipates its future capacity needs through financial and workforce planning, ICT development and training for councillors and staff. This ensures it can sustain its high level of performance.
- 41 The Council uses private sector partnerships to increase its capacity and deliver its priorities. Working with private sector partners, the Council has been able to embark on ambitious capital projects such as the Cattle Market and the Haverhill cinema developments to deliver a prosperous and sustainable economy. These projects are being delivered within the Council's embedded project and risk management frameworks. There is a dedicated project manager for the Cattle Market project as well as an impact management group who ensure that the project is well managed and risk is controlled. The Council have also used the findings from the Impact Management Group to run 'Bury Lovers' events and address the concerns being raised by the community and local businesses; this includes the creation of a separate website providing updates and feedback. The Haverhill cinema development is being delivered, in part, through the £10 million Haverhill Masterplan and was in direct response to public consultation on the needs of the local community. Using their learning from the Bury St Edmunds Parkway cinema development to increase their capacity to deliver and working with the same private sector partners the Council have invested £9.25 million in the development which saw construction start in September 2007. The Council have been responsive to the needs of their community and used their learning from previous projects to work with private sector partners to deliver against these needs.

- 42 The Council is effective in facilitating and delivering outcomes through its voluntary and community sector partners. It is working with them to gain added benefits and outcomes for their communities. For example, voluntary sector organisations have access to different funding sources which have been used to deliver joint projects for the community, such as the festival of culture. They have also responded to local community need such as supporting the Anselm community centre project in extending and refurbishing the centre. The estate on which the centre was built had been identified as a pocket of deprivation and lacked a community centre. Working with the local community the Council provided £250,000 funding and helped a successful bid to the Big Lottery Fund for £265,000. The centre opened in February 2007 and several residents who were involved in the project have gone on to become trustees and directors of the charity which runs the centre. The LSP board has also added to capacity by creating a community chest of small grants for the voluntary sector. The grants process is robust but the Council is still in the early the stages of developing a commissioning approach with the voluntary and community sector.
- 43 The Council has strong arrangements for identifying and managing risks; an improvement since the last CPA inspection. It has revised its risk management strategy which is regularly monitored. Service plans, project status reports and committee reports include detail on risks. Partnership programmes and projects are also risk assessed and councillors and staff are now trained in the subject. The robust process provides the Council with confidence that major risk is being effectively monitored and managed. Alongside this, effective project management is applied. The Council uses a rigorous approach similar to Prince2. It provides dedicated resources for major projects and a programme board, and a clear project initiation form, which includes statements on equality related and environmental impact. The corporate management team reviews any red flags or areas of risk. Consequently, the Council is able to manage its extensive capital programme and service development well.
- 44 The Council manages its financial capacity effectively. It has robust capital programme arrangements and financial planning. Its financial modelling over a five year period allows it to plan ahead to provide revenue to support capital schemes. It uses partnership arrangements and its own capital funds to attract considerable external funding including a £1.5 million grant from East of England Development Agency (EEDA) for new public venue on the Cattle Market development. It has also accessed £100,000 from the Regional Centre for Excellence (RCE) for the public service village (PSV) project. The Council has a clear asset management strategy and arrangements with contingency planning to dispose of £18 million of assets to bridge the gap between £57 million capital spend planned over next four years and £51 million available.

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

- 45** The Council achieves and improves value for money (VFM). In the 2007 use of resources review they were recognised as performing strongly for improving and managing value for money. They have adopted an innovative approach to achieving efficiencies through service reviews and the DR-IVE programme. These have led to £1.3 million of savings in 2006/07 and more responsive services. For example, a review of the benefits service has led to a significant reduction in the average time for processing new claim from 55 days 2003/04 to 23 days 2006/07, whilst increasing satisfaction to 86 per cent. The Council's focus on achieving VFM efficiencies is also leading to tangible improvements in services to users.
- 46** Managerial and political leadership is very effective. Decision making is transparent. There is a culture of openness and respect, with clear divisions between strategic and operational responsibility. The Council works within the ethical framework, the Standards Committee is proactive and there are good officer and councillor working relationships. It also puts appropriate structures in place to support its priorities such as the Haverhill Working Group and the Sustainable Development Panel. Cabinet agendas are structured around priorities. These arrangements help maintain focus and ensure that there are constructive working relationships in place.
- 47** Member and officer capacity is strong. The Council has a Members Development Charter with personal development plans for councillors and a comprehensive range of training courses are available. The three new portfolio holders have been peer mentored and councillors have also benefited from IDeA¹ Leadership Academy training. The Council also manages its staff resources effectively. It has a workforce development plan and a clear personal performance and development system for managers and staff. The Council's innovative approach to staff care includes arrangements such as the Working on Wellbeing (WOW) initiative and Lifelong Learning Programme which offers a broad range of activities such as helping with literacy skills. The Council has successfully reduced its sickness absence from 12.5 days lost per employee in 2002/03 to 8.7 in 2006/07, which has helped to increase productivity. It also has a good approach to succession planning and meets gaps in capacity. Therefore it responds flexibly to new demands on its business.

¹ Improvement and Development Agency

- 48 Overview and scrutiny committees contribute effectively to service improvement and policy making. The Council has a prioritised scrutiny work programme based on clearly defined criteria, and the scrutiny process is identifying and driving improvements. The Performance and Audit Committee monitors performance effectively. In addition, scrutiny evaluations of the housing stock transfer and leisure transfer outline good practice, learning points and suggestions for improvement. Following the review of the leisure transfer review a new process for monitoring maintenance issues and a more proactive approach to resolving these was put in place which resulted in improved customer satisfaction. The Housing review also identified that Havebury could play a higher profile role on the LSP; that a guide to aids and adaptations was needed, and that land ownership should be clarified to ensure that tenants receive good grounds maintenance service. The Council and its partners made these changes, with the result that customers receive better service.
- 49 The use of ICT and e-government is supporting the Council's priorities. The Council take a business case approach to ICT developments. For example, it researched the call handling possibilities offered by a customer relationship management system (CRM) but in the end introduced a new internet protocol (IP) telephony system which has improved call handling at service level with a contact centre facility. The Council also has a new complaints handling system which has improved the process and responsiveness to complaints. The Council's website is not cutting edge but is gradually being upgraded. ICT professionals, communications staff and content managers have focused on improving readability which ensures access for those with limited literacy or who use English as a second language.
- 50 The Council considers the diverse needs of the local community in service development. The Council's Diversity Group progresses the Council's Diversity and Equality agenda and monitors the action plan. It has delivered training for all councillors and officers and this is to be supplemented by an on-line training package. It has assessed equality impact in services, and in new policies and projects. It has gained the 'two ticks' recruitment symbol to show it is positive about employing disabled people. The Council has now achieved level two and delivering an action plan to move them to level three of the equality standard.

Performance management

- 51 The Council is performing strongly in this area. Since the 2004 CPA, when performance management was identified as an area for improvement, they have focussed investment and resources to deliver their priority of raising standards of corporate efficiency. Robust frameworks ensure that learning internally, from others and partners are used to drive improvement.

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

- 52** The Council has a strong performance management culture which is comprehensive but not complicated. They have a published, easy to understand performance management guide for staff and councillors which sets out the performance framework, reporting and planning processes as well as outlining roles and responsibilities and timescale for providing data for reports. There is quarterly monitoring of KPIs (key performance indicators) to the Performance and Audit Committee and monthly reporting to the corporate management team. In addition, directorates review local performance indicators within their teams on weekly to monthly basis. The KPIs and local performance indicators are used to inform targets to be included in the annual individual personal development reviews; this helps ensure that all levels of the organisation understand how they are contributing to the overall ambitions and priorities of the Council. Processes are in place to ensure that at each level of reporting, underperforming indicators are managed and actions taken to address issues. Data is collected locally via a performance indicator sheet and transferred into a centrally managed spreadsheet where the reports are produced. The structure and simplicity of approach to performance management has ensured that the whole organisation is clear about their responsibility for data and performance indicators.
- 53** The Council and its partners seek and make use of intelligence and information about performance and act upon it to drive improvement against priorities. In partnership with the Police and Abbeycroft Leisure Trust, the Council supported the delivery of the Teenage Kicks project at Haverhill Leisure Centre in 2006. The project was established to tackle anti-social behaviour in the Jubilee walk area of Haverhill and supported their priority of improving community safety and wellbeing. Using external providers, Positive Futures, and providing two staff members, the project ran for seven weeks. During this time the police identified a marked reduction in localised anti-social behaviour incidents and feedback from youth workers, voluntary groups and residents, as well as those taking part was very positive. The Council are effectively sharing performance data with Abbeycroft Leisure Trust to shape a range of programmes which support the WSLSP 'getting western Suffolk active' programme, and performance is publicly reported through the LSP website. They are also using this partnership to target those at risk of disadvantage through specific programmes for those with disabilities and outreach programmes for the young and elderly. Through a partnership approach to sharing intelligence, a co-ordinated and targeted service is being provided which is having a positive impact on communities.

- 54 The Council has clear measures which enable it to work with other providers to evaluate processes, costs and outcomes. It reviews a range of national, regional and local indicators which are informed by benchmarking and regular review of changes in community needs and legislation. It is undertaking a number of projects with the RCE to inform its targets around efficiencies and benchmark procurement spend with other Suffolk councils. Following a review of vehicle maintenance the Council invited other authorities to undertake a joint tender to achieve efficiencies of scale. As a result, four authorities from Essex and Suffolk have entered into a contract for tyre maintenance. The Council's strategies also have clear links to national, regional and local targets. For example, the play strategy provides clear outcomes to be achieved at each of these levels. The strategy has robust monitoring arrangements and a balance of quantitative and qualitative indicators which include user experience and feedback from focus groups. Clearly defined measures and targets to monitor outcomes provide an effective basis to benchmark performance with others.
- 55 The Council is a learning organisation which opens itself up to challenge and review, and is using lessons learnt to improve. Internally Overview and Scrutiny and the Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committees provide effective challenge. As a result of a scrutiny review of the Abbeycroft Leisure Trust transfer, there has been improvement in clarity of the complaint handling and data sharing. The Council has won a number of awards, such as Britain in Bloom 2007 and the Procurement DR-IVE team won a national award recognising outstanding achievement in procurement from the Society of Procurement Officers. The Council also proactively shares learning with its partners. For example, a recent theft of a corporate laptop resulted in a review of IT security and identified a need to improve some areas. The Chief Executive and IT team are presenting their learning to others across the region with the aim of preventing similar situations in other authorities.
- 56 The Council has robust processes in place to improve service performance. Their business systems review process involves cross department officers and councillors and has led to improvements in a number of underperforming areas, such as benefits and homelessness. Addressing performance against homelessness was considered a priority for the Council in terms of community wellbeing but also in providing support to vulnerable groups. As a result of the review, the homelessness team now delivers a more customer focussed service with a greater emphasis on support and prevention. The Council has improved their performance against average length of stay in bed and breakfast and hostel accommodation. In 2006/07 there was an increase in people presenting as homeless, with 390 households assisted, of these 29 became homeless which was a 79 per cent decrease on the previous year.

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

- 57** Cross departmental working is leading to improvement in services. The Council is using its officers' skills to focus on delivery of corporate outcomes rather than just focusing on service areas. All of the major projects being undertaken by the Council are led by a cross process working party, which includes officers and councillors and where appropriate partners and community representatives. Locally officers from community safety, waste management and environmental health staff have proactively worked together on a multi-agency impact day in Haverhill. The event was funded through the Western Area Crime and Disorder Reduction partnership (CDRP). The outcome of the day was a high profile intervention, where low level anti-social behaviour such as graffiti, fly tipping and untaxed vehicles was addressed to improve quality of life for local residents.
- 58** Information on the Council's performance is accessible, clear and coherent. The Council has put in place guidance to ensure that all users are able to access information. They have published 'Helping People Understand Us' for staff and councillors to highlight the facilities available to support people with disabilities and those communities for which English is a second language and enable them to gain better access to information. The Community Spirit newsletter is used to communicate progress towards priorities and performance information is readily available on the website. Stakeholders agree that the Council adopts an open approach to performance management and that it is transparent in its reporting of progress towards targets. As a result of its approach to sharing performance information, partnership projects are leading to shared impacts in the community, such as the targeted provision of diversionary activities for young people through football tournaments and motocross trips.
- 59** There is active and responsive management of complaints and staff and user feedback are used to deliver improved services. The corporate complaints process is robust and the bi-annual review of complaints is rigorous. The Council has revised the complaint process and made it more accessible to users including clearer service standards. As a result, in the period April - September 2007 only one complaint was outside these standards and this was due to specific circumstances relating to the complaint and the complainant was kept informed the progress at all stages. In addition, learning from the complaint process is captured and reviewed via a lessons learnt process. Services are also responsive to local complaints and feedback; for example, changes were made to cashier's access to information following a complaint, allowing payments for council tax to continue following a change of address. Overall satisfaction with complaints handling was 40 per cent 2006/07, which is above the national and regional averages.

What has been achieved?

Achievement and improvement

- 60 The Council is performing strongly in this area. It is working with its partners regionally to inform agendas and to respond to local need. Good levels of performance against both national indicators and local priorities are being sustained or improved and areas of underperformance are addressed. The Council has continued to deliver clear outcomes for the wider community through effective partnerships whilst delivering good value for money and achieving stretching efficiency savings.
- 61 Service performance is strong. Between 2002/03 and 2006/07, 59 per cent of best value performance indicators (BVPIs) have improved (including satisfaction indicators). More notably, 78 per cent of indicators have improved in the last year compared to the district council average of 57 per cent. 38 per cent of these indicators are in the best quartile which compares favourably with all district councils. This shows significant sustained improvement in performance over the period.

Improving the safety and wellbeing of the community

- 62 The Council is working with public, private and voluntary and community partners to deliver improvements in safety and wellbeing of the community, particularly for their priority vulnerable groups. For example, they have worked in partnership with Haverhill Town Council, Three Counties Transport, Haverhill Volunteer Centre and Haverhill Association of Voluntary Organisations to launch a shopmobility scheme in Haverhill. The Council has been responsive to partner and community needs; within nine months of the proposal for shopmobility in Haverhill being put forward, the scheme was operational. The scheme started in July 2007 with 15 members of the scheme and an average of 20 occasional hires per month. The Council have provided £30,000 for set up and £7,700 for the first year running costs and partners have provided the remainder. The project has received very positive feedback from partners, users and the local community. The Council is also working effectively with partners to increase the supply of housing to those who need it most. It has secured £13.9 million over the past four years for affordable housing which demonstrates the Council's commitment to reducing the waiting list, which was 4,600 in May 2007. The Council has worked with a range of social housing providers to deliver affordable housing schemes; for example, schemes developed with Havebury Housing Partnership include providing a minimum of eight homes at Acacia Avenue, Bury St Edmunds, and the Merry Go Round development. In total, it is creating 88 new affordable homes in Haverhill, 76 in the rural areas and 70 in Bury St Edmunds. Local people now have greater access to affordable homes of good quality.

- 63 The Council has worked well with partners to improve wellbeing within its communities. It has delivered a number of improvement projects against its ambition to address the older people's needs. Working with the Suffolk PCT and other partners, the Council has run a number of 'sloppy slipper' events where older people were able to exchange their old slippers for new slippers. At the events, risk assessments took place and 20 referrals were made for day and treatments services. Age Concern gave out over 100 information bags. Although the direct relationship with reduced falls cannot be tracked, the sessions were mini -surgeries which promoted overall wellbeing and were positive experiences for those who attended. The Council is also targeting housing provision for elderly residents. For example, the Blackbourne View scheme in conjunction with the County Council, Ixworth Parish Council and two social landlords has resulted in extra care accommodation for 66 elderly residents.
- 64 The Council is ensuring that both the community and the organisation benefit from healthier lifestyles. As part of the WSLSP, the Council are leading on the Getting Western Suffolk Active project. The aim is to raise participation in physical activity particularly in under represented groups or those at risk of exclusion. A range of activities have been organised including summer schemes such as 'turn up and play' and the 'be part of it' project which showcased disability sports. Through the stress implementation project a staff survey was carried out to identify areas of stress and those at risk. As a result, a range of new practices were introduced including: the provision of stress courses; well being events; and working with its partners Abbeycroft leisure trust, reduced leisure centre membership for staff. A subsequent stress survey has shown that progress has been made in all but one area.
- 65 The Council is utilising partner's expertise to deliver outcomes in the community and sub-regional priorities. Reducing substance misuse is a priority for the Western Suffolk Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership. As a result of data sharing, a project was set up and a wide range of agencies worked to fund and deliver the 'right bunch of artheads' project in Bury St Edmunds. The project used art to highlight the issue of substance misuse in the wider community. The success of the project has resulted in a second event being planned for 2008. The plans for the event were presented in a 'Dragons Den' style bid at the East of England Regional Assembly Innovations Day. The result was the team received double the funding they had asked for, a total of £5,000, which will cover the cost of the whole project. The team also received the Innovations Day trophy.
- 66 The Council are effectively promoting community cohesion and appreciation of diversity within the borough, to support their priority of improving community wellbeing. This is being achieved through a range of events, the largest of these being the West Suffolk festival of culture. Working with partner organisations the festival has been run in Bury St Edmunds for the last two years. The festival attracts over 600 visitors and has received very positive feedback both from those attending and the WSLSP. As a result of the event, the Council has been better able to engage with community groups such as the Gypsy and Traveller community through the Romany Theatre Group and the Polish Community through links with the a new local language school.

Securing a sustainable and attractive environment

- 67 The Council has committed to managing the future development of the borough and keeping the borough clean and green and identifying rural affordable housing sites.
- 68 The Council is performing strongly in relation to its environment priority. It achieves over 50 per cent recycling and composting and has beacon council status, although it is still trying to resolve the issue of high kilograms of waste collected per head, which has improved over the last year. Home composting trials in Ixworth showed that the potential for removing 2.4 kilograms per head from the waste stream. It has also continued to innovate and is now piloting kerbside battery collection, maximising the range of materials collected at the kerbside.
- 69 The Council has received external awards for the environment which have included the Nowton Park Green Flag awards and 'five star' awards for public toilets in Bury St. Edmunds and Haverhill. The Council has high satisfaction around environmental services: 86 per cent of customers are satisfied with waste collection; 88 per cent satisfied with recycling collection; 82 per cent of people surveyed are satisfied with parks.
- 70 The Council is ensuring a sustainable future for the district. Requirements which go beyond current planning guidance on sustainability are included in the Council's five master plans for the district. This ensures that nature conservation, energy efficiency including renewable energy and passive solar energy, the code for sustainable homes and green travel plans are a pre-requisite of development. The Council has integrated this into all its current construction projects including the PSV, which will have a ground source heat pump and solar energy. It is aiming for a Building Research Establishment Environmental assessment method (BREEAM) excellence rating, which will accredit the sustainable features of the building, and so far has self assessed at 67 out of 70.
- 71 The Council has an established approach to sustainability. It has recycling bins in the Council's offices; it obtains electricity from renewable sources and set up a green business forum. It has reduced carbon dioxide emissions from Council offices from 732 tonnes in 2005/06 to 334 tonnes in 2006/07. It also led in setting up the Suffolk carbon reduction partnership. This has developed action plans on water, energy supply and use, agriculture and waste, ensuring a common approach and high priority for reducing greenhouse gases.

- 72 The Council has designated keeping the borough clean and green as a priority and has taken steps to improve street cleanliness. It has removed rural detritus which remained after flooding and the towns are particularly clean. In spite of this, recorded performance for cleanliness at the end 2006/07 was in the worst 25 per cent for district councils, although satisfaction with the cleanliness of public space was high at 81 per cent. It works well with partners on clearing fly tips and on other types of environmental enforcement and it has agreed that Police Community Support Officers will issue fixed penalty notices after training in early 2008. Planning processing indicators have improved over the last three years but performance is still below average, although the Council has focussed on the quality of the outcomes of planning decisions. Satisfaction with the planning service is high, at 84 per cent. However, the Council has invested in increased capacity by recruiting to vacant posts and streamlining processes to ensure a customer focus. It is also improving processes around section 106 agreements, aiming to improve the clarity around major planning applications and further enhance the quality of planning outcomes.

Creating a prosperous local economy

- 73 The Council and its partners have the strategic priorities of: enabling a prosperous, sustainable economy, encouraging sustainable tourism and improving skills and learning opportunities.
- 74 The Council achieves some high quality built developments, for example the Malthouse project which has delivered an award winning building as well as providing housing. There are many historic buildings in the borough and the Council has also advised on or delivered high quality restorations such as the Athenaeum, which is in a sensitive location. It has taken a considered approach to the Cattle market which has had a major S106 agreement with implications for town centre enhancements and transport. Even though planning applications are not always determined quickly, the Council makes efforts to deliver the right quality outcome in developments.
- 75 The Council is successful in attracting new investors to deliver its priority on economy prosperity. Its 'place shaping' approach has included a master plan for Haverhill town centre, including a new multiplex cinema alongside the leisure centre. It has also improved town centre landscapes in the Cleales Car Park and Jubilee Walk areas, and is also working to improve provision of business land and start up units. The Council's partners also deliver a variety of courses on business and life skills to improve labour market prospects and in 2006/07, 856 adults benefited in Haverhill and Bury St Edmunds. It works effectively with regional agencies on inward investment. In the past year, two new businesses have decided to move to the borough creating around three hundred new jobs each.

- 76 The Council and its partners have responded effectively to the growing importance of the hospitality sector in the local economy, and the need to attract overnight visitors. The Council invests in its local heritage; for example, the recently refurbished Athenaeum adds to Bury's attraction by providing a historic venue for conferences and weddings. Its tourism information centre was runner up in the Suffolk Tourism awards and it is providing events to attract visitors such as the Christmas Fayre and America 400. It now has a major hotel in Haverhill. Its partner, the West Suffolk College, also provides leisure and tourism courses and, last year, 25 students went on to employment in the local area.
- 77 External funding is benefiting the local economy. The Cattle Market scheme, currently under construction, will bring a new departmental store, 35 smaller shops, 62 apartments and a 500 seater multipurpose venue. It has attracted £87 million in private sector investment and a £1.5 million grant from EEDA (East of England Development Agency). The Council gained £694,000 of local authority business growth initiative funding in 2007/08. The business start up units at Suffolk Business Park have attracted £5 million from a private developer and a major new supermarket in Haverhill is leading to £15 million of inward investment. This will ensure that more money is spent locally, providing more jobs.

Raising standards and corporate efficiency

- 78 The Council has taken an effective and focussed approach to improving corporate efficiencies. Since 2004, the Council has appointed a joint procurement officer with neighbouring Forest Heath and Babergh District Councils and procurement has been major focus for efficiency savings through the DR-IVE programme. This has resulted in efficiency savings of £1.3 million in 2006/07. The procurement DR-IVE team of staff and councillors also won the national award for outstanding achievement in procurement for the Society of Procurement Officers in 2006.
- 79 The Council is exploring and using innovative ways to improve service delivery. For example, following a systems review it found that health and safety inspections required a 28 step process, half of which were administrative. This resulted in much of the environmental officer's time being spent in the office. In order to create a more efficient and responsive service the review team considered new delivery options. The Council is now undertaking a feasibility study on the use of tablet computers with portable printers and electronic forms to streamline the process. Internal processes have also been strengthened since the 2004 CPA report. Risk management and project management have received significant focus and are now embedded in the organisation. The processes are integrated into all plans, policies and projects and both officers and councillors are clear how these approaches are raising standards and ensuring future plans and projects are sustainable.

- 80** Improved standards and efficiency are recognised externally. The Council has been commended by the Municipal Journal for its DR-IVE programme. As part of the county-wide 'Doing Business Better' project, the legal team was highly commended in the Local Government Chronicle awards, was finalist in the Municipal Journal awards and was winner of the CIPFA/ Public Finance award for the Public Servant of the year in the shared services category. Internal communications and work on the PSV have been identified as 'exemplars' by the I&DeA (Improvement and Development Agency). The Council has also been awarded Member development charter by the East of England Regional Assembly; only the second council in the region to be awarded this. The Council can demonstrate their robust and innovative approaches are recognised as good practice by external, independent organisations.
- 81** Service users recognise improvements in service standards with high levels of satisfaction being in the majority of areas and in particular the Council's priority areas. The best value user satisfaction survey of 2006/07 found satisfaction with cleanliness, waste recycling, sports and leisure facilities, theatres and concert halls, parks and open spaces, planning and benefits are all above the regional and national averages. Of these five are performing in the best quartile.

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 St Edmundsbury Borough Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 24 October to 30 October 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.