

Corporate Assessment Report

February 2008



Comprehensive Performance Assessment

South Norfolk District Council

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Introduction

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

Executive summary

- 3 South Norfolk District Council is an 'excellent' council. Since being classed as 'good' in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment of 2003, the Council has made strong progress across all areas. The quality of services delivered by the Council or in partnership with others is high. Satisfaction levels are good and improving.
- 4 The Council was inspected in autumn 2007, within six months of the transfer of political power from the Liberal Democrats to the Conservatives. The Council has adopted new priorities and is in the process of communicating these; aligning its strategies to its new priorities and developing a stronger neighbourhood focus to deliver the ambitions for the district.
- 5 Clear ambitions for the district are set out in the community strategy, based on a good understanding of local needs. The delivery of these ambitions links directly to the Local Area Agreement (LAA) themes and there are clear targets and strategies underpinning them. The Council is developing neighbourhood forums to improve delivery of these ambitions at a local level.
- 6 The Council has a good understanding of resident needs. It has developed its own new prioritised ambitions based on resident consultation to identify local priorities, and on regional and national priorities. There is now a stronger focus on the priorities and how to deliver them and a stronger message on what are not priorities is developing through the refinement of existing projects. The Council is in the process of aligning its strategies and plans to these new priorities and is taking the opportunity to revisit these to ensure they are relevant. Targets for the new priorities have been set but not all of these are outcome based. This makes it difficult to assess what the Council is trying to achieve through its priorities. However, plans to deliver priorities are being put in place and specific actions to deliver improvement are being introduced, such as the environmental crime team.
- 7 Capacity is strong. Strong political and managerial leadership is in place with a renewed focus on delivering priorities and service improvement, whilst reducing costs. The capacity of key post-holders, councillors and officers is sufficient to provide consistent leadership, challenge and support across the Council. Staff are strongly focused on customer service, are well motivated and encouraged to be innovative. Financial capacity is sufficient to sustain performance and the Council is debt free. A clear and sustained focus on delivering value for money is in place. Council tax is low when compared to other shire districts and a high quality of service has been achieved in priority areas. Effective partnership working is providing increased capacity.
- 8 Performance management is consistent, rigorous and open, and actively supports the delivery and improvement of services. As a result the Council is among the top performers in the country with 39 per cent of its performance indicators amongst the best 25 per cent nationally. Action is taken to address any weaker performing areas, although there are few. The benefits service was a poor performer six years ago and is now the best in the country.

- 9 Effective use of ICT is delivering significant service improvement and improving efficiency. Access to services is improving through investment and development of the Council's website which has increased self-service and access to specific services such as planning. The use of ICT within services has streamlined processes and resulted in improved performance, for example in benefits. Increased use of the web is reducing the number of telephone calls to the Council, enabling staff to focus on their work and improving efficiency.
- 10 Services are of high quality and good progress has been achieved across most priority areas. The Council has a large percentage of high performing indicators. Satisfaction levels are good and improving with performance in the top 25 per cent of councils for waste collection, cleanliness, complaints handling and for the Council overall. The environment is clean and well maintained and the rate of recycling has improved to meet government standards. Effective partnership activity is reducing crime and anti-social behaviour. The Council listens and engages well with local residents and is working in partnership to deal effectively with the proposed growth agenda. There is a strong focus on customers and improving services for them; taking services directly to their homes, delivering more holistic services through effective partnership working and listening and responding to service users' comments.

Areas for improvement

- 11 The Council should strengthen its plans to provide a greater focus on outcomes that will make a real difference to the local community. The Council needs to develop short, medium and long term outcome targets. The absence of such targets means that it is difficult to see what the Council is trying to achieve through its priorities.
- 12 The Council needs to ensure there are explicit links between its own ambitions and those of the community, as set out in the community strategy. Without these links it is difficult to assess how the Council is directly contributing to community ambitions.

Summary of assessment scores

Headline questions	Theme	Score*	Weighted score
What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?	Ambition	3	6
	Prioritisation	3	6
What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?	Capacity	4	8
	Performance management	3	6
What has been achieved?	Achievement and Improvement	3	21
Weighted score			47
CPA category			Excellent
*Key to scores			
1 – Below minimum requirements – inadequate performance. 2 – At only minimum requirements – adequate performance. 3 – Consistently above minimum requirements – performing well. 4 – Well above minimum requirements – performing strongly.			

**Banding thresholds for determining CPA category

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

Context

The locality

- 13 South Norfolk is a mainly rural area covering 908 square kilometres in the heart of East Anglia. It is bounded by the City of Norwich in the north, the Norfolk Broads to the east and the River Waveney in the south, which is also the Norfolk/Suffolk county boundary. The district has a population of 115,300 (ONS mid-year estimate) of whom 35 per cent live in rural locations. The remainder live in the market towns of Wymondham, Diss, and Harleston or on the fringes of Norwich at Costessy. The Council headquarters are located in Long Stratton.
- 14 The population is growing overall, but most of this growth is in the older age groups. Between 1991 and 2001 there have been significant population changes, with a 48 per cent increase in the 50 - 54 age group and a 30.6 per cent reduction in the number of 20 - 24 year olds. Over 65s are projected to increase by 20 per cent between 2006 and 2012, increasing the pressure on services for older people such as health care and social services. People from black and minority ethnic communities make up 1.1 per cent of the population, the largest minority group being Chinese. There are 18 gypsy and traveller sites. In the 2004 Index of Multiple Deprivation South Norfolk is the 281st most deprived of the 354 districts nationally. However there are some specific pockets of rural deprivation and poverty. Some residents suffer from rural isolation, lack of transport and limited access to services.
- 15 The key employment sectors are retail, health and manufacturing, especially of automotive and electrical parts. The district is heavily influenced by Norwich, where a large number of South Norfolk's employed people work. Most employers within the district are small with only five per cent employing more than 25 people. The current unemployment rate, according to the job seekers allowance claimant count rate, October 2007, is lower than regional and national figures at 1.1 per cent. Adult earnings are only 85 per cent of the national average and a third of the workforce has no qualifications.
- 16 There is very limited access to further and higher education within the district and young people often travel lengthy distances to access post 16 training and education. Young people obtain good grades at GCSE. Over two thirds of 15 year olds achieved five or more grades A*- C compared to 50 per cent nationally. But many do not go on to college due to the lack of availability and access to vocational and other courses. Out of 80,000 people aged 16 to 74 years in the district, 28.7 per cent have no qualifications according to the 2001 Census.
- 17 The residents of South Norfolk are some of the healthiest in the country. Crime levels are lower than the national averages, and fear of crime is relatively low.

- 18 The draft East of England Plan recommends growth across Norwich City, Broadland and South Norfolk districts of 37,500 homes and 35,000 jobs by 2021. Working jointly through the Greater Norwich Housing Partnership the councils have produced a sub-regional homelessness strategy and a draft sub-regional housing strategy. The Council is producing a development brief on Norwich Research Park which is vital to creating a portion of the required jobs.

The Council

- 19 The Council has been led by a Conservative Administration since May 2007, replacing the Liberal Democrats who had led the Council for 12 years. Currently there are 39 Conservative and seven Liberal Democrat councillors. Fifty four per cent of those elected in 2007 are new councillors. The Council has recently set six new priorities:
- be businesslike and efficient providing services people value most;
 - become among the best in the country for recycling;
 - get to grips with anti-social behaviour and environmental crime;
 - preserve the special character of our market towns and villages;
 - make South Norfolk a culturally and economically richer place to live and work; and
 - innovate and deliver low cost housing for local people.
- 20 Political management arrangements are based on the cabinet and leader structure, adopted in 2002. Cabinet is chaired by the Leader of the Council and comprises seven members of the controlling group, with portfolio responsibility aligned to the new priorities. There is a scrutiny committee and three overview sub-committees, an accounts and audit committee, a planning committee and three area planning committees. The overview sub-committees are recently established and reflect the responsibilities of the portfolios and will oversee their work. These replace four policy development panels.
- 21 The Council's net revenue budget for 2007/08 is £13.45 million. Capital expenditure budget is £7 million for 2007/08. The Council is debt-free and has not entered into any new leases since 2003. The Council holds cash investments of approximately £30 million, which includes revenue reserves of £2.375 million as at 31 March 2007. The district council tax for a Band D property is £127.52 for 2007/08, below the national average.
- 22 The Council's management structure comprises a Chief Executive and two corporate directors, supported by nine heads of service. This has been in place since 2003. A management restructure has been agreed which will reduce senior management capacity by 40 per cent. The Council currently employs 465 full time equivalent staff, having transferred its housing stock to Saffron Housing in 2004.

- 23 The Local Strategic Partnership (the South Norfolk Alliance) published its second three year community strategy in 2004 and is in the process of developing its third. The Council and its partners are signatories to the Norfolk Local Area Agreement 2006/09.
- 24 The possibility of local government review in Norfolk, initially based on an enlarged Norwich City, has created some uncertainty about the future for the Council. Councils in Norfolk were originally invited to submit outline or concept plans and proposals to the Boundary Committee by the end of November 2007. South Norfolk Council did this and is preparing a bid for a four 'unitary council county' jointly with the Borough Council of King's Lynn and West Norfolk. The final business case for this will be submitted in 2008 although there is some uncertainty over the exact timescale since the Boundary Committee remit is no longer confined to the Norfolk area.
- 25 The Audit Commission assessed the Council as 'good' in 2003 (on a five point scale of poor, weak, fair, good and excellent). The Council has aspired to be excellent since and has adopted the strap line: 'moving to excellence'. An IDeA Peer Review was completed in 2007, financed by the Building Capacity East Fund. Its recommendations were incorporated into the Council's CPA improvement plan.
- 26 As the Council has only recently developed its new priorities the Audit Commission has assessed progress against its former priorities in the achievement and improvement section. These are:
- produce more affordable housing;
 - improve the environment;
 - reduce crime and the fear of crime;
 - shape South Norfolk through the Local Development Framework;
 - improve access to services and transport links;
 - include young people and take account of their needs;
 - include the needs and views of older people; and
 - be fair, recognise differences and provide equal opportunities for all.

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

Ambition

- 27 The Council is performing well in this area. The Council and its partners have a shared vision for the district. This is based on a range of data and information gathered through consultation and partnership working. There are links between the community strategy and Local Area Agreement (LAA) themes but explicit links to the new corporate plan are less clear. The Council is recognised as a key player in the sub-region providing effective community leadership.
- 28 The Council and its partners have a shared vision for the district, based on an understanding of local needs. This vision is well-understood by councillors, members of staff and other stakeholders. The community strategy, 2004/07, sets out a vision for the district:
- 'Working together, local people, local businesses, the voluntary and community sectors and public bodies will strive to make South Norfolk:
- a place where a wide diversity of local people take the central role in making decisions about their community and its development and where the public services they receive are excellent and provide good value for money;
 - a healthier and even safer place to live where the crime levels and fear of crime are low;
 - a place where suitable accommodation, support and care are available for all whatever their needs;
 - an area of high learning expectations and achievement, meeting the needs of individuals and the economy;
 - a place where the environment is protected and respected, quality housing is available to all and it is possible to travel around using varied forms of transport;
 - an area where economic opportunity and development is diverse, sustainable, accessible and appropriate to the needs of all the community; and
 - an area that provides quality value for money, cultural and leisure opportunities that improve the life and well being of residents and visitors.'
- 29 This vision stems from long-established community planning processes including extensive work with partner organisations and consultation with the public. The new community strategy, which is in development, is using a range of information and data to identify key issues, including demographic changes, workshops sessions, shared data from partners and information from the refresh of the LAA. This ensures the ambitions represent key concerns and issues for the district.

- 30** The corporate plan 2006/09 clearly sets out the Council's aims for the community. It presents the Council's mission statement of 'putting PEOPLE first in everything we do' and contains eight priority objectives (see paragraph 26). The plan sets out some success measures, for example to provide 500 affordable homes by 2009 but its overall focus is on action to be taken, rather than what will be achieved. The priority objectives were developed through consultation and reflect the local context and wider community ambitions. For example, improving access to services and transport links; shaping the district through the local development framework (LDF) and including the needs and views of older people. The Council's aims are clear.
- 31** The Council has effectively streamlined its aims. Following the election, and change of administration in May 2007, it has published six prioritised pledges for the next four years (see paragraph 19). Local and national performance indicators (PIs) have been allocated to the priority objectives and clear annual targets have been set through to 2009/10 which will be reviewed annually. The Council has strengthened its focus on what it wants to achieve.
- 32** There are clear links between the community strategy and LAA, but explicit links to the Council's new corporate plan and its targets are less clear. The community vision is delivered through an annual programme of action which is set out under the LAA themes of children and young people; healthier communities and older people; safer and stronger communities; and economic development and enterprise; plus a fifth theme for other South Norfolk priorities: community living and sustainable communities. The new corporate aims reflect the community ambitions of the LSP, for example with a focus on crime reduction and making the district a culturally and economically richer place to live and work. But the new corporate plan published in October 2007 does not clearly explain the links between the two sets of ambitions or the themes it is delivering against or identify common targets. This makes it difficult to see how the Council is directly contributing to the community ambitions and LAA themes.
- 33** Ambitions are realistic. They are supported by a number of joint strategies. These include the crime, disorder and reduction partnership (CDRP) strategy, the waste management strategy and the children and young people's plan for Norfolk. These clearly set out targets to achieve ambitions and identify the role of the Council in delivering these. The Council has identified some outcomes it can achieve with its partners in the LSP's annual programme of action. These include improving business survival rates and increasing the percentage of over 60s involved in sport and physical activity. This ensures clarity of what will be achieved and by whom.

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- 34 The Council has a good understanding of the needs of its residents. A stakeholder survey conducted by the Audit Commission indicated that 82 per cent of respondents tended to agree, or strongly agree that the Council has a good understanding of all its local communities, the locality and the challenges it faces. The Council regularly undertakes a range of consultation including forums, citizens' panel, and budget consultations. Some of this engagement is targeted at specific groups including young people, and people with disabilities and some is targeted in rural areas. It also shares a range of data with partners and uses it effectively to target actions and develop strategies. The Council has established protocols with Norfolk Constabulary, for example to share data on crime reduction activity. The sharing of information within the Greater Norwich Housing Partnership has been used to develop joint strategies. The newly adopted aims are based on a comprehensive assessment of residents stated preferences and clearly link to regional and national priorities. The Council has brought the management of Wymondham leisure centre back in-house and in response to customer demands has made improvements to the facility and its services. To support the local economy the Council with the County Council has developed a motor sport and engineering innovation centre to promote engineering excellence. All 15 units with workshop and office space are now let. Local residents and stakeholders are involved in both the setting of ambitions and the development of strategies to deliver them.
- 35 The Council provides effective community leadership and is taking steps to make further improvement. It has recognised that its area forums were not working effectively and is developing five neighbourhood forums. These will be used as a mechanism to deliver community ambitions and LAA targets at a more focused local level, to involve partners at a local level and to improve resident engagement. These will link to the existing police run Safer Neighbourhood Action Panels (SNAP). In other areas the Council is already providing effective and proactive community leadership through strengthening community cohesion with its work with gypsies and travellers and encouraging high value employment through business incubation centres. The Council also works effectively sub-regionally on the growth agenda with the County Council and Norwich City and Broadland District councils. Seventy seven per cent of stakeholders were positive about the Council's approach to working with partners to deliver priorities and outcomes. This range of effective partnership working is assisting the Council to deliver its ambitions.
- 36 The Council ensures that partnership working is focused. The Council's scrutiny committee has a programme to review systematically the partnerships to which the Council belongs, reviewing each against its objectives. It has reviewed the LSP and as a result of the review, the Board now has a streamlined structure, with a clear executive function for the overall delivery of the vision. Partners have committed to their roles, responsibilities and actions.

Prioritisation

- 37 The Council is performing well in this area. New ranked priorities for improvement have been developed which are understood by key stakeholders. The Council has reduced the projects it was running from over 200 to 16, focusing on those with the strongest links to its new priorities. Robust plans were in place to deliver the old priorities and these are being refocused to reflect the new priorities. Clear targets to deliver the new priorities have been developed, but not all of these are outcome based. Resources have been aligned with the old priorities and plans are in place to realign them to the new priorities for the next financial year. Some shifting of resources to deliver new priorities has been undertaken.
- 38 Councillors, staff members and stakeholders have a good understanding of the Council's new priorities. These were published in the best value performance plan in June 2007 and in the new corporate plan adopted and published in October 2007. The Council is in the process of communicating them to its residents via its magazine: 'the Link' and via its website. It has already made effective use of the local press to communicate them. Internally the Council has promoted its priorities well, through presentations at its weekly learning hour, through the intranet and displays and posters within its buildings. It has also met with parish and town councils to discuss priorities. Consequently stakeholders know what the Council is aiming to deliver.
- 39 The Council is clear about what are the new priorities and has prioritised them. The peer review, undertaken in March 2007, found 'a priority culture' where everything is a priority and no-one could specify non-priorities. The new administration has responded quickly to these findings and consultation and streamlining has produced six clear, ranked key priorities. The Council has plans to identify its non-priorities as part of its budget setting process. This is giving greater clarity over key priorities and lesser priorities.
- 40 The Council is effectively focusing activity on delivery of its new priorities. It has reviewed the projects it was running, which was over 200. These have been scored depending on how well they meet the new priorities to establish 16 key strategic projects. The resource allocation for these top 16 projects is clear. Other projects have been discontinued, for example the implementation of a customer relation management system. This prioritisation work has been the culmination of a review of project management resulting in the creation of a project board to monitor the new process, a virtual programme office, utilising existing staff resources and new project management guidance to guide project managers. There is now a stronger focus on the priorities and how to deliver them and a stronger message on what are not priorities is developing through the refinement of existing projects.

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- 41 A clear framework of strategies and plans was in place to deliver the old priorities and is being developed to deliver the new priorities. The medium term financial plan and financial strategy link to the previous priorities and to the wider regional agenda and are designed to deliver the priorities of the Council. With the change in priorities the Council is still in the process of revising strategies to reflect the new priorities as part of its corporate planning cycle. Service plans have been revised and links between activities and new priorities made. These feed into team plans. There are plans to review other strategies and reduce the number if necessary. This framework is enabling the Council to deliver its priorities.
- 42 Plans to deliver priorities are based on a good understanding of community needs. For example, in developing the LDF the Council set up staffed exhibitions in village halls and on markets in key towns. It targeted the identified hard to reach group of 20 - 30 year olds through hiring a trailer and setting up an exhibition in supermarket car parks. A consultant visited the known 'settled' gypsy community to obtain the views of gypsies and travellers. The disability equality scheme was informed by a broad range of consultation and engagement methods with disabled people and representative groups. This included a disability activity day where 100 disabled people met representatives from the Council and other stakeholders and shared specific issues through a 'speed dating' event. The Council has also engaged with the older people's forum on developing its council tax leaflet. The Council is ensuring it understands needs and feeds these into delivery plans.
- 43 The Council has clear targets for improvement in place, but not all of these are outcome based. The focus for improvement is on performance indicators (PIs) with targets for PIs, both national and local, set out and published in the annual performance plan. The new corporate plan also includes some national targets, for example recycling targets. There are clear targets in delivery and partner plans including the CDRP strategy and waste management plan. But these targets are expressed in terms of outputs rather than outcomes. This enables the Council to measure its success in priorities such as recycling and environmental crime. But its success in other priorities is less clear and stakeholders and residents cannot see whether the Council is improving quality of life.
- 44 Resources have been aligned with old priorities. The corporate plan and financial strategy have been considered in parallel to ensure priorities are affordable. Where bids for additional resources are requested these are analysed through a scoring framework which tests how each bid contributes to the Council's corporate priorities and gives weighting to issues such as working with partners. Within the leisure service robust action is taken through the use of grants to deliver priorities. Two years ago the service had a key service organisation scheme which distributed £50,000 to 12 organisations but no monitoring of how the money was used. In 2006 a review of the grant system resulted in a move to investment partnership agreements which were piloted last year. These are reliant on products which align to corporate priorities. As a result funding has been reduced to some applicants. The Council plans to consult residents on its budget and has plans to align resources with the new priorities in the development of the budget for 2008/09. This ensures the Council maintains focus on its priorities and has the required resources to deliver.

- 45** Resources are being targeted at some new priorities. The Council established an environmental crime team to help deliver its priority of tackling issues of anti-social behaviour and improving the environment. Levels of litter and graffiti have reduced as a result. Data on anti-social behaviour and environmental crime is shared with the police on a routine basis. Access to the service has been improved through the introduction of a free phone number for the reporting of fly-tipping, graffiti, litter, dog fouling and anti-social behaviour to ensure swift remedial action.

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

Capacity

- 46 The Council is performing strongly in this area. It has the current capacity required to achieve its priorities with high levels of good information and communications technology (ICT) capability, clear and strong leadership, and well motivated, innovative staff. Staff training and development is appropriate and effective. Good use is made of partnerships. Scrutiny is effective. There is a good relationship between councillors and officers and there are no significant weaknesses or corporate governance issues that would prevent further improvement in outcomes for local people being achieved. Capacity is being strengthened through the use of external funding.
- 47 Decision-making processes are effective. Cabinet meetings are open and inclusive. Contributions from all councillors and members of the public are encouraged. This ensures that decision making is transparent and results in relevant actions. Scrutiny arrangements are clearly defined. The scrutiny function reviews the work and decisions of cabinet and commissions specific pieces of work and investigations. It reviews the effectiveness of partner and external organisations against defined objectives and considers issues raised by parish councils under the 'community call for action'. Scrutiny called-in the access to services project due to concerns over costs and what had been achieved; recommending the development of a fully costed action plan to take it forward. The Council has also engaged in a joint scrutiny with scrutiny committees from Norfolk County Council, Broadland District Council and Norwich City Council to review the current level and quality of local bus service provision in the Greater Norwich area. The corporate governance framework makes clear where and by whom different decisions are taken and decision making processes are well known. This ensures decisions for action are taken to meet priorities.
- 48 Risk management informs corporate and strategic planning and is embedded. Effective processes are in place to review risks as part of the regular process of planning, delivering and reviewing services, for example the cabinet report template requires authors to identify and discuss risks associated with their recommendations. Risk is recorded onto the risk database with a plan of action, either to reduce likelihood or to reduce consequences or both. The accounts and audit committee receives regular updates on risk management. Training on risk management is provided to councillors and officers. This ensures the Council is both aware of risk and is working to minimise risk where possible.

- 49 Existing financial capacity is sufficiently strong to allow the Council to sustain performance. Its budget preparation and monitoring arrangements allow councillors and officers to assess areas for further investment and areas requiring new investment. The Council has met its Gershon targets. It achieved efficiency savings of over £540,000 in 2005/06 and £362,000 in 2006/07, and the annual efficiency plan has a target of £362,400 to be delivered in 2007/08. At the end of September 2007 £137,600 had been saved. Projected savings for the balance of the year indicate that the Council is on track to meet and potentially exceed its target. The Council ensures it can sustain improvements over time.
- 50 The Council is performing well in securing value for money (VfM). A number of key decisions made over the last year have reduced costs and improved quality of service. Bringing its three leisure centres into an integrated in-house unit from April 2007 has reduced costs. There is an effective approach to procurement. Services recently going out to tender include internal audit and street cleaning. The decision to bring the street cleaning contract back in-house resulted in significant savings. The new emphasis on commercial services, with the appointment of a portfolio holder, is helping the Council to maximise income opportunity. Council tax payers are benefiting through the reduced costs, improved services and increased income.
- 51 The Council is successful in accessing external funding, using it to enhance capacity and deliver service improvements. The joint funding of posts, for example the health improvement manager, funded with the PCT, is enabling the Council to deliver activities not traditionally core to a council. This includes setting up a first responder team to provide initial response to medical emergencies and involvement in special projects, such as teaching resuscitation to young farmers as deaths from coronary disease are high in the farming community. In 2006/07 the Council obtained direct grants totalling £2.7 million, including a DEFRA grant to finance the Poringland drainage scheme. 'Leader +' funding has been used to support development of rural services such as post offices. The Council has also received performance grants, for example, in planning, benefits and recycling. These have been used to invest and further improve these services. Capacity is being strengthened through use of external funding.
- 52 The Council has clear and strong political and managerial leadership. The new administration is providing a clear focus through its revised priorities, streamlining of projects and its stronger links between portfolio holders and priorities. The Chief Executive is well respected both internally and externally. The capacity of key post-holders, councillors and officers is sufficient to provide consistent leadership, challenge and support across the Council. Senior councillors and managers work well together and respect each other. The Council's standards committee and the monitoring officer have a high profile within the Council. Ethical standards are high and councillors take seriously the need to comply with the Code of Conduct. The roles of councillors and officers are well defined, and people are clear what they are responsible for. This ensures effective working.

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- 53** Significant service improvements and improved access to services have been made through effective use of ICT. The website project moved it from an information site to a transactional site offering services online, including reporting fly-tipping and abandoned vehicles, accessing planning information and making job applications online. Since online job applications were introduced the average number of applications per post has increased from 7.1 to 11.5. Costs have reduced with less postage and printing, and a wider and potentially more diverse audience is being reached. Planning online led to a reduction of 2,000 phone calls per month and 10,000 hits on the web site, reducing the time spent dealing with enquiries and improving efficiency. As a result the Council has improved efficiency and delivered improved service performance.
- 54** Staff members are well motivated and encouraged to be flexible and innovative. Internal communications are very good and staff members value the Council's intranet as a key source of information. Team working and good practice are encouraged and rewarded, for example the benefits service gives staff awards for achievement. Staff members are encouraged to be innovative, for example community safety staff have undertaken street briefings with residents to resolve anti-social behaviour issues. Recent staff survey results indicate satisfied staff who understand their contribution to the service, have good working relationships with line managers, and who feel they make a valuable contribution to the service. A protected weekly learning hour emphasises to the workforce the importance the Council places on the development of skills and wider awareness. A detailed performance appraisal system is in place which includes outcomes to achieve and target dates for achievement. The Council's workforce is therefore well placed to deliver priorities and improvement.
- 55** An effective approach to workforce planning is ensuring capacity to deliver and improve services. A three-year workforce profile, updated annually, includes developing an individual workforce plan for each service. This incorporates, for example, a breakdown of staff by ethnicity, and predictive retirements. Within this process, heads of service are required to submit growth bids for staff increases. In 2005/06 the Council achieved performance in the top 25 per cent of local councils for sickness absence with performance at seven days. However in 2006/07 performance has dropped to 8.65 days. As a result the Council has revised its managing attendance policy and is closely monitoring individual services with specific problems. Performance is below average regarding the overall proportion of staff with disabilities in the workforce, the proportion of women in senior management and representation of black and minority ethnic groups. The Council is addressing this under-representation in the workforce. It is taking action such as developing internal female candidates through personal coaching and shadowing opportunities and encouraging the disclosure of disability within the organisation. These processes enable the Council to plan confidently for short-term future staff needs within the organisation.

- 56 The Council has a strong approach to training and development. Councillor training plans address individual requirements and corporate issues. A wide range of techniques used include distance learning and delivery of specific training solutions for individuals. Training is evaluated and feedback used to improve future events. Effective training and development for staff is provided, identified through the appraisal process. Professional training is generous and given a high profile. A management development programme has been completed by 84 staff. There are few recruitment and retention issues, although currently there are vacancies within property services which it is having difficult filling, but contingency arrangements are in place. These practices mean that staff members are well-equipped to carry out their roles in improving services.
- 57 Partnerships are used effectively to deliver service improvement. For example, successful building control service is delivered through a joint partnership and managed through a service level agreement. A joint building control shared service provides services for the councils of South Norfolk, Broadland and Norwich City, bringing together their building control services and sharing resources and expertise. Effective partnership working with statutory and voluntary and community sector partners improves access to services. The funding and development of the council information centres (CICs) in Harleston, Diss and Norwich provides local residents with access to a range of services provided by the Council, the county council and their partners. The Council's good use of partnerships is significantly enhancing its capacity.
- 58 The Council has an effective approach to diversity and maintains a strong focus on users. It has achieved Level 2 of the Equalities Standard and is working towards Level 3 by 2009. The Council is conducting a pilot in its leisure services to achieve Level 3. A dedicated part-time equalities officer has been appointed to work on this and to work with senior managers on conducting impact assessments and to give them the necessary skills to be able to mainstream this in future. The Council has an equalities group with councillors and staff representatives from all services. This approach ensures equalities are seen as everyone's responsibility and the Council remains focused on achieving Level 3. As part of Norfolk's supporting people programme the Council takes the lead on gypsies and travellers and mental health. It has carried out a district wide survey of gypsy and traveller accommodation needs and is working on a gypsy and traveller local development document. The Council also promoted and developed a new advocacy service delivered by a gypsy led voluntary service in response to an identified gap in service provision across the county. Specific services have developed to meet the needs of those with disabilities, for example, the work of the countryside rangers with schools has a special needs element. All staff members have attended dignity and respect training. Following the training each participant was asked to identify a commitment relating to equalities. This was picked up during their next appraisal. This has helped behaviours change. Staff members have a strong commitment to customer service and to improving the quality of service provided.

Performance management

- 59 The Council is performing well in this area. An effective performance management framework is in place. The Council has used performance information well, through the setting of challenging targets, to drive service improvement and deliver improved PIs. Officers and councillors are clear about their roles. Partnerships are effectively performance managed and learning is used to drive improvement. User feedback and complaints are used to improve services.
- 60 The robust performance management framework is consistently applied. There are explicit links between the Council's ambitions through to service plans. The annual performance plan sets out targets for the next year, including local, regional and national, which then feed into service plans, team plans and into individual targets agreed through the appraisal process. Local indicators are set to reflect priorities. Staff are fully aware of the targets they are working to and know whether they are, or are not, meeting their targets.
- 61 Roles and responsibilities in performance management are clear. Performance information is reviewed monthly by heads of service and is reported formally to cabinet, scrutiny and overview sub-committees quarterly using a 'traffic light' system. This has been further strengthened through the focus of the three sub-committees who are looking at fewer PIs, giving them more time to examine these in detail. Portfolio holders meet with heads of service to discuss performance information; this being described as more challenging since the change in administration. Financial information is presented with performance information. This strong focus on performance management is seen in the Council's PI success.
- 62 The Council has effectively used performance management to show continuing service improvement. Since 2003 it has used the 'Model for Excellence' tool focusing on specific service areas that it wanted to improve, targeting PIs that align with priorities. In 2005/06 performance was above average for 75 per cent of PIs targeted. In 2007/08 the Council is looking to improve its performance for invoices paid on time from 97.27 per cent to 100 per cent and to improve sickness absence from 8.65 to 7.5 days. The Council quickly identifies and tackles any areas of underperformance, of which there are very few. For example in 2005/06 the percentage of land littered to a significant or heavy extent was comparatively high at 28.9 per cent. The Council responded by increasing the specification of the street cleaning contract and re-tendering the contract. It was awarded in-house, making £100,000 saving against other bids. The proportion of land littered reduced to 14 per cent in 2006/07. This strong focus on PIs ensures the Council quickly rectifies issues.

- 63** Complaints data and user feedback is used effectively to drive service improvement. Learning is shared through the performance team and reports regularly go to councillors. Improvements to Wymondham leisure centre have recently been made following complaints about staffing levels and maintenance of equipment. Within the benefits service streamlined processes and return of original documents by recorded delivery has reduced customer complaints about documents going astray in the post. Residents see that the Council listens and responds.
- 64** Performance management in partnership working is good. Performance management arrangements are in place for its building control consultancy with monitoring of financial reporting undertaken monthly and service specific performance standards included in a SLA with quarterly reporting. Effective performance management of the CDRP is enabling the partnership to direct resources at specific areas of identified need. The LSP Board receives quarterly monitoring reports on progress against the action programme. For example, in September 2007 progress on supporting older people included an update on a new day time urgent need service which has been used by 154 people in the first three months. Information is clear and simply laid out. The Council understands the contribution of its partners.
- 65** The Council uses opportunities to learn effectively. It learns from its own successes and failures, and from good practice within the Council, other councils, its partners and other organisations. It has developed its ICT revenues and benefits systems based on what it has learned from what has worked well, and not so well, internally and from other organisations' successes. Recommendations from the peer review have been actioned, for example, with new priorities aligned to portfolios and the access to services project reviewed. The Council is well-placed to push forward future developments successfully based on its approach to learning.

What has been achieved?

Achievement and Improvement

- 66 The Council is performing well in this area. Services have consistently improved with good PI performance. The Council is effectively delivering improved access to a range of services through good use of ICT, through more flexible working, such as visiting people in their homes, and through supporting transport initiatives. Improvements are also being made to the environment and to reduce crime and fear of crime. The Council consults and engages well with its residents. But performance in delivering affordable housing is weak.
- 67 As the Council has only recently developed its new priorities the Audit Commission has assessed progress against its former priorities and national PIs in this section.
- 68 Council services are performing well overall. Both the rate of improvement in best value performance indicators, and the number in the best performing 25 per cent nationally, places the Council among the top performers in the country. Performance in the old priority areas is good overall. Between 2002/03 and 2005/06 76 per cent of performance indicators improved against an average of 58 per cent for similar councils. In 2005/06 39 per cent of indicators were in the best performing 25 per cent, compared to national average for district councils of 31 per cent.
- 69 Resident satisfaction is good and improving. Surveys undertaken in 2006/07 showed that satisfaction levels in key survey areas were comparably high, with performance in the top 25 per cent of councils for waste collection, cleanliness, complaints handling and the Council overall, and above average for planning and recycling. However satisfaction levels are below average for sports and leisure facilities and parks and open spaces. In all cases percentage figures have improved from the previous survey in 2003/04. Performance is stronger in the Council's priority areas.
- 70 Planning service performance has improved over the last four years and is currently performing strongly. Since 2003 the service has improved project management, developed effective use of ICT and cultivated a strong focus on good performance. The service has a more focused workforce supported by a good performance regime with good analysis and collection of data. As a result service improvement has been maintained. Currently the Council performs in the top 25 per cent of councils for dealing with minor applications and other applications and is above average for major applications. The Council is also amongst the top 25 per cent for the quality of service checklist.
- 71 Achievements delivered against the former eight corporate priorities are set out below.

Produce more affordable housing

- 72** The Council is delivering affordable housing against its targets but when compared nationally performance is weak. In 2005/06, 71 new affordable homes were completed in South Norfolk and in 2006/07 the target of 106 was exceeded as 108 affordable homes were completed. The target for 2007/08 is 185 and in quarter one the Council has completed 43. Performance has improved from delivering 37 houses in 2003/04 to 108 in 2006/07 and the Council is continuing to set challenging targets to achieve 210 by 2008/09. But when compared to other councils' performance on affordable housing completions per thousand dwellings and number of low demand homes per thousand dwellings, it is amongst the worst 25 per cent of councils nationally. The Council is investing £2 million over three years to deliver low cost housing.

Improve the environment

- 73** Combined recycling and composting rates are improving and performance is above average. The Council is focused on diverting more waste from going to landfill. It has achieved high performance in its recycling rates, recycling 29.57 per cent in 2005/06, an improvement from 18.8 per cent in 2003/04. Combined with composting of 0.8 per cent the Council achieved its DEFRA statutory performance standard target of 30 per cent by 2005/06 and achieved above average performance when compared to other councils. Since 2005/06 the Council has offered a charged fortnightly collection of garden waste. This was initially piloted in two parishes and has now been rolled out to the whole district, with 14 per cent of homes signed up to the scheme. The Council is working with local communities to promote home and community composting. Two community composting schemes are currently in place at Denton and Geldeston. This is reducing the amount of residual waste, whilst increasing composting.
- 74** Waste collected per household is low. In 2005/06 the Council was amongst the top 25 per cent of councils with 342kg per head, a reduction of 5.5 per cent over the previous year. Improvement has continued with the Council in 2006/07 achieving the LPSA¹ stretch target for the amount of waste to be brought down to 2003 levels and securing a £200,000 grant. Effective reduction in waste going to landfill is being achieved.
- 75** The local environment is improving through a range of actions. Since 2000, a total of 4,000 trees and 11 kilometres of hedging have been planted in the district, a total of 47,690 individual plants with planting undertaken by volunteers. In 2005/06 standards of cleanliness were poor, with performance in the worst 25 per cent of councils. To address this, in July 2007, the Council took the street cleaning and fly-tipping services in-house, giving it more flexibility to move resources to where they are needed the most. Surveillance using hidden cameras and covert operations in known hot spots has increased as has enforcement action against offenders. Customers now have a free phone number to report fly-tipping incidents and other environmental crime. Residents report improved cleanliness.

¹ Local Public Service Achievement

Reduce crime and the fear of crime

- 76 The Council has made progress in reducing crime and the fear of crime. Overall the district has low crime rates for domestic burglaries, theft of motor vehicles and theft from a motor vehicle. The Council has developed a frontline service where community safety staff, environmental officers and other staff are working in partnership with the police on Safer Neighbourhood Teams. Joint training days for police community support officers (PCSOs) are in place and a full time anti-social behaviour coordinator has been appointed. A Sanctuary scheme for victims of domestic violence has been established and inter-agency training to raise awareness of domestic violence issues delivered. Software has been installed to record anti-social behaviour so this can be shared readily with the police. A graffiti removing vehicle has been purchased. This strong partnership working ensures effective action to reduce crime.
- 77 The Council has responded effectively to concerns about crime and anti-social behaviour. At Diss, following complaints from residents about car park noise and the gathering of young people in the evenings, the Council consulted residents in the adjoining warden scheme, asking them to monitor the disturbances to measure the impact on the community. The Council supplemented this with noise monitoring equipment and covert surveillance via a concealed camera. The results confirmed the reports by residents and alerted the Council to the scale of the disturbances. The car park has been closed in evenings resulting in a reduction of complaints and improving the quality of life for local residents.
- 78 The Council and its partners are achieving tangible outcomes for the community based on the work of the CDRP. The CDRP has put in place a number of initiatives aimed at reducing crime levels, the fear and perception of crime across communities. As a result, perception of crime in Diss which was high in 2006 has reduced significantly in 2007. It uses local knowledge when drawing up project plans targeted to tackling areas of concern for residents. Achievements are clearly recorded, which show that targeted areas of high crime are being reduced. Fear of crime and perceptions regarding the level of crime have correspondingly reduced.

Shape South Norfolk through the Local Development Framework

- 79 The Council is working effectively with partners to shape South Norfolk through the LDF, although this work is at an early stage. The Council is working with the councils of Broadland and Norwich and the County Council to create a joint core strategy. This will set out the long-term vision and strategic objectives for shaping the Greater Norwich Area and develop policies for delivering these objectives. This is expected to be agreed by spring 2010. A gypsy and traveller local development document is also being developed with the issues and options consultation completed. The statement of community involvement was adopted following extensive public consultation. A development brief for the Norwich Research Park was consulted on earlier in 2007 through a range of exhibitions.

- 80 The Council has successfully bid, with its Greater Norwich partners, for Growth Point status. The Greater Norwich Development Partnership created in 2006 to deal with the successful bid is preparing a joint LDF core strategy to include integrated land use and transport policies. The awarding of Growth Point status has levered in over £2 million of funding from the Government so far.

Improve access to services and transport links

- 81 The Council is working effectively with partners to improve access to transport. It is trying to provide a wide choice of travel options to reduce reliance on car and its associated environmental impacts. In partnership with groups of volunteers community transport schemes have been set up that cover the whole district. These include community car schemes, volunteer run bus services such as Borderhoppa in Diss and the Wymondham Flexibus, and Kickstart, a moped loan scheme, with over 50 members this year. This range of initiatives is helping residents to access alternative modes of transport.
- 82 The Council has a strong focus on improving access to its services and its facilities and has made significant improvements. Access to council services can be made via a large number of partner sites. The philosophy across Norfolk is to keep things seamless with calls going to the County Council transferred to the districts, through access via libraries and through CICs. Library staff have been trained to help residents with the introduction of choice based lettings. The Council is a member of the INTRAN translation and interpretation county partnership and is making increasing use of this service. All public buildings are fully compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act. Examples of improving access within services include leisure services providing sign language training for staff to help with holiday activities and regular activities at the leisure facilities and other programmes such as the local 'Deaftastics' club, a multi sports club for young people with hearing problems. British Sign Language has been incorporated into two outdoor theatre performances.
- 83 Further building blocks are being put in place to improve access to services. The Council is introducing council-wide free phone telephone numbers from November 2007 to provide a more accessible service. The Council won the regional round of the Digital Challenge Bid, a government initiative to utilise technology to improve access to services for disadvantaged communities. As a result the Council is working on a project to join up health, social services, voluntary organisations and the Council, to collect data and deliver services and information on behalf of each other when visiting people in their own homes. Further ICT developments are planned for environmental services.

- 84 Access to benefits is improving. In 2005/06 the service performed amongst the top 25 per cent of councils in three PIs and was above average in the other two. Performance has continued to improve. Currently, according to data from the Department of Work and Pensions, the Council is the best in the country. This has been achieved with a 27 per cent increase in caseload alongside a ten per cent decrease in staff since April 2002. All new customers are now visited at home and their identity documents are scanned. This removes the need for them to travel to Long Stratton or to use the postal service. It also gives officers an opportunity to gain better insight and provide a more holistic response by offering other services which may be appropriate.

Include young people and take account of their needs

- 85 The Council has made good progress on including young people and taking account of their needs. The Council aims to place children and young people at the heart of its services. Its work on involving young people in decisions which affect their lives and futures has been recognised with the award of Beacon status for 'positive youth engagement in the democratic process' in March 2006 with the county council. An active youth forum, South Norfolk Youth Action, (SNYA) is in place, giving views and proposals to Council on, for example the LDF, budget, and service delivery improvements.
- 86 Effective engagement with young people is being achieved. The Council is working to broaden the aspirations and increase educational attainment of young people. This will help it meet its community ambitions. It has worked for three years with students at Long Stratton High School studying ICT. The Council provides them with advice and information on how it uses technology to do its business with hands on experience. The project has been well received by the school and recognised by Ofsted inspectors as an example of good practice. The Council also works with young people to develop their skills and business ideas through its youth enterprise programme. Staff members have worked closely with the Princes Trust to help young people set up in business and have acted as Business Mentors to provide a commitment to the young person for two years. At the annual Crucial Crew event 900 children from local primary schools were trained in food safety and health and safety. The Council is delivering a range of skills and experience to young people.

Include the needs and views of older people

- 87 The Council actively seeks the views of older people. The Council supports the independent Older Peoples Forum and has used it to consult on the budget setting process, the redesign of literature accompanying Council Tax bills and the design of the website. Although primarily a consultative/lobbying organisation the grant funding that it receives and its co-ordinating role on behalf of its members does mean that the Council is better aware of the impact its actions are having on different parts of the community.

- 88 The Council responds to the specific needs of older people. It has a dedicated in-house home improvement agency, Care and Repair. This delivers a home security project which is working with older people to ensure they remain secure and as healthy as possible, providing opportunities and assistance to live full, independent lives. Care and Repair takes a holistic approach when visiting the over 60s and looks at the whole situation to assist them. Referrals are being made to voluntary organisations to their befriending service and to other key partnerships for loft insulation, central heating and falls prevention exercise. The Council is delivering a programme of falls prevention work in partnership with the PCT, including falls prevention health trainers at Ogden Court sheltered accommodation scheme. These check slippers to ensure they fit properly, check walking frames for faults, and direct people to the Care and Repair team for grants. This work supports older people to live at home.

Be fair, recognise differences and provide equal opportunities for all

- 89 There is a strong focus on providing equal opportunities. The Council's mission statement under its previous administration was to 'put PEOPLE first in everything we do'. This is clearly embedded throughout the Council with a strong focus from staff on customers and service delivery.
- 90 The Council works effectively to provide equal opportunities. It has used a Romany theatre company to help dispel a lot of myths and break down barriers about gypsies and travellers. The Council is creating a gypsy and traveller local development document and is working closely with local communities and the traveller communities to find acceptable sites. Twenty sites have been identified for further investigation. The Council supports the local disability forum and has worked with them to highlight access issues, including poor physical access at local railway station. As a result of this more people in South Norfolk feel involved in their local community, 38 per cent, than nationally, 30 per cent.
- 91 Individual needs are met effectively. As part of the supporting people programme there is a countywide strategy covering housing and support needs for each recognised disadvantaged or minority group. Groups include offenders, young people at risk, older people, refugees and people with physical or sensory disability. The Council has an annual budget of £300,000 to provide disabled facilities grants. In the last year the Council helped 135 people with disability to stay in their own homes. Access to work funding has also been used to support staff members with disabilities.

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 South Norfolk District Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 22 to 26 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.