

Corporate Assessment Report

February 2008



# **Comprehensive Performance Assessment**

**North Shropshire 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 North Shropshire District Council has improved significantly since its last Comprehensive Performance Assessment and is now a good council, recognised by partners and residents as providing effective and innovative leadership, well-founded ambitions and good services.
- 4 The Council has developed a clear and innovative vision for the district. The refreshed community strategy is closely aligned to the aims of the county strategic partnership and the Local Area Agreement (LAA). The Council plays an active and constructive role in the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) and has enabled it to develop clear ambitions for the area. These have been translated into action plans for partners, including the Council, to deliver. The four themes of the community strategy are at the heart of everything the Council does, as is clear from the Corporate Plan. These are articulated as providing: a community with children and young people at the heart; a healthier community, with healthy independent older people; a more sustainable community, with greater access to affordable housing; and a safer and stronger community, with sustained reductions in local crime.
- 5 The Council provides effective leadership across a wide range of issues, and has not been distracted from the needs of local residents by the impending reorganisation to unitary status. Partners point to strong leadership from the Chief Executive and her officer team at a regional and local level, with a less visible, but still adequate political leadership. The Council works well with a range of partners, and while political leadership is good internally, member visibility with partners is insufficient. This has not prevented good partnership working, for example, in crime and disorder, on the new play strategy, on offering more choice to people at risk of homelessness, and on the investment of the dividend from the housing stock transfer into the Community Asset Trust (CAT).
- 6 The Council is well run and well managed. Decision making is timely, transparent and effective, and the whole Council works as a team. Previous weaknesses in internal capacity have been remedied by structural and cultural change, underpinned by strong developmental training. The council's staff demonstrate a positive attitude to improvement and the achievement of corporate objectives. The Council is well-run financially and has secured a strong financial standing which has enabled it to set Council Tax increases at two and a half percent for the last two years. A strong performance culture has been developed, supported by effective systems of monitoring and management. Weaknesses in performance are quickly identified, and an escalation process to members, allows for further in-depth study, or timely reallocation of resources, on the more difficult problems. Performance data is routinely shared with partners, who also attend key meetings, such as performance surgeries. As a result internal good practice is migrating to partnerships.

- 7 The Council is performing well in delivering its services. Performance is generally high in all of the four priority areas, particularly so in community safety, where it is helping to reduce crime and helping victims of domestic violence; and also in sustainability, where the successful work in regenerating the market towns is being followed up by the North Shropshire Economic Forum, and by the Community Asset Trust (CAT). Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI) data shows that 60 per cent of services are better than average and the rate of improvement of the past two years has been sustained in the current year, according to Council data.

## Areas for improvement

- 8 The Council has improved its understanding of its diverse communities in the past three years, but there is clear need for the Council to devote further resources to understanding the needs and views of groups at risk of disadvantage, and especially minorities, and to reflect these consistently in the delivery of all services.
- 9 The Council is well led internally, with councillors taking charge of the local agenda. Externally, however, the political leadership of the Council needs to become more visible, and translate its internal achievements into more consistent leadership on behalf of the community in strategic partnerships, and especially the LSP.
- 10 The Council needs to implement a robust corporate approach to complaint monitoring, to ensure that this feedback translates into improved performance. This is required to ensure that customer satisfaction with complaints handling is improved, and to ensure a positive impact of feedback on service improvement.

## Summary of assessment scores

Headline questions	Theme	Score*	Weighted score
What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?	Ambition	2	4
	Prioritisation	2	4
What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?	Capacity	3	6
	Performance management	3	6
What has been achieved?	Achievement and Improvement	3	21
<b>weighted score</b>			<b>41</b>

CPA category	Good
<b>*Key to scores</b>	
1 – below minimum requirements – <b>inadequate performance</b>	
2 – at only minimum requirements – <b>adequate performance</b>	
3 – consistently above minimum requirements – <b>performing well</b>	
4 – well above minimum requirements – <b>performing strongly</b>	

### \*\*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 North Shropshire is a large rural and sparsely populated district located in the north east of Shropshire. It shares borders with Cheshire and Staffordshire and the boroughs of Oswestry, Shrewsbury and Atcham and Telford and Wrekin. It has a population of around 59,500, half of which lives in the market towns of Ellesmere, Market Drayton, Wem and Whitchurch.
- 12 The local economy is changing, with a continuing decline in agriculture and related industries. Regeneration and economic development are key concerns of local people. Competition from larger retailing centres outside the district is threatening the viability and vitality of the district's market towns. Unemployment is below regional and national averages, but there is a lower than average skills base and numbers of business start-ups are below average. Income levels are also below average, in part due to a relatively high incidence of low skilled occupations. There are average levels of deprivation, with isolated pockets. Two of the 24 wards in North Shropshire, Market Drayton East and Whitchurch North, fall within the 30 per cent most deprived in England.
- 13 Transportation is a key concern for local people. The main road links, the A41 and A49 run north to south, and east-west links are mainly on minor roads. The area is not well served by public transport which creates problems of access to services and jobs, especially for those in rural areas. The district has slightly below average numbers of young people, and more people over the age of retirement. The district has seen a rise in the number of people moving to the area, mostly to retire. This has fuelled a significant increase in house prices. Combined with low average wages locally, this means that affordable housing remains an important issue for all local people, and especially young people. The highest proportion of homes are owner occupied, with just over ten per cent of all accommodation privately rented. The council transferred its housing stock, which comprised just ten per cent of the housing in the district, to a registered social landlord in 2007.
- 14 Only 1.14 per cent of the population were from black and minority ethnic communities at the time of the 2001 census. Since then there has been a recent and sizeable influx of migrant workers from Eastern Europe. This has created new challenges of community cohesion for the Council and its partners
- 15 The community strategy for North Shropshire 2006-2009 envisages a community with children and young people at the heart; a healthier community and healthy independent older people; a sustainable community; a safer and stronger community.

- 16 The Council's vision and ambitions are translated into seven clear key priority outcomes. These are:
- more young people will be involved in organised activities which help them to become more active citizens;
  - more members of the community becoming healthier and more active;
  - the total number of jobs and businesses in North Shropshire and the amount of inward investment will be increased;
  - more local people will be able to afford housing which is appropriate to their needs within North Shropshire district;
  - the total amount of household waste collected will be reduced and the proportion of household waste that is recycled will be increased;
  - the cleanliness of land, streets, pavements, footpaths, verges and highways will be improved; and
  - the percentage of local people who consider that they 'feel safe' in the streets in the district's towns and villages will be increased.

## The Council

- 17 In 2004, North Shropshire District Council was assessed as 'Poor' in the first comprehensive performance assessment, and was among the lowest performing councils in England. This score acted as a catalyst for change, with the appointment of a new Chief Executive, a significant management restructure and a revitalisation of the culture characterised by the slogan 'Excellence is never an Accident'.
- 18 The corporate assessment site visit took place five months after the elections in May 2007, which gave the Conservatives overall control of the Council for the first time, after years without any group having overall control. This new Council has 40 members, of which 26 are Conservative, 12 are Independent and 2 are Labour.
- 19 The Council's revenue budget for 2007/08 is £8.126million and the capital programme budget is £4,935million. The Council has been debt-free since 2004 and has significant levels of reserves and balances, at over £3million as at 31 March 2007. Total spending per head of population is £168 (second quartile compared to all district councils) and council tax increases have been restricted to 2.5 per cent for the last two years, after two previous years at 5 per cent.
- 20 The Council management structure comprises a Chief Executive, supported by a Deputy and Assistant Chief Executive, supported by fifteen service managers. The Council currently employs around 290 staff, of whom 1.6 per cent are from a black and minority ethnic (BME) background. The Council is run on the Cabinet model, with a Leader and portfolio holders.

- 21 Local government reorganisation in Shropshire will result in the establishment of a unitary body covering the entire County by April 2009. This will subsume existing district councils, including North Shropshire. The Council is now an active participant in county-wide discussions on the transition to the new structure.

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

### Ambition

- 22 Performance in this area is adequate. The Council and its partners, including across the County, have developed a clear, agreed and well understood vision for the District, which is founded in the community strategy 2006-09. Refreshed again in 2007, the community strategy now has realistic shared targets aimed at delivering tangible improvements for local people. It is closely aligned to the Local Area Agreement (LAA) and to the county-wide strategic partnership which establishes the strategic framework for the Council's corporate plan. Partnership working in translating the vision into action is good. A wide range of partners state that there is consistent, supportive and often innovative leadership from the Council, with for example, the establishment of the new Community Asset Trust (CAT). The leadership of councillors is not as visible as partners would like, but the Chief Executive sets and achieves high standards of ambition and leadership from her management and staff. And although the Council and its partners understand local underlying need well, their knowledge of the impact of recent inward migration is still incomplete.
- 23 The Council is providing adequate and improving community leadership although councillors are not yet fully involved in leading and shaping the full range of external initiatives. Ambitions are clear and communicated effectively, internally and externally via the frameworks set out in the communications strategy. Residents and partners have a good understanding of the Council's priorities. The prospective reorganisation to unitary status, which will see the District Council subsumed into a unitary authority covering Shropshire by April 2009, has not deflected the Council's attention from its vision for the district. The Council is providing community leadership with an increasingly wide range of partners outside the district, such as the County Council, Shropshire Access Partnership (SAP), Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin Activity Partnership. Within the district, the recent changes at Cabinet level from no overall control in May 2007 may have resulted in the Chief Executive carrying much of the external leadership role, with the Cabinet and other officers playing more of a supporting role. This means that while the Council leadership is seen as having improved significantly in the past three years, there is an appetite within the district and the county for more impact from councillors.

- 24 Partners are actively involved in translating the vision into action. Partners are clear and enthusiastic about their roles in delivering shared objectives and this helps to drive delivery. The Council and its partners have collectively learned from past failures. A realistic balance between need and capacity has now been struck, with the emphasis on achievable shared targets, with tangible outcomes for local people. The four community strategy themes are translated into action plans which are then subject to joint working within the delivery groups of the North Shropshire Partnership (NSP). As a result, the early momentum of achievement in the NSP delivery groups brought about by much improved communication has been sustained.
- 25 The Chief Executive provides strong leadership to ensure effective partnership working in priority areas. In Ellesmere the Council has led the development of ambitious partnership plans to build on the Market Towns Initiative to create a transformation of the town centre. The Ellesmere Wharf development will revitalise a site of former industrial land which has been derelict for 25 years, creating 200 new homes, 40 per cent of which will be affordable, and providing expanded primary care services. The Council therefore acts as a catalyst to develop innovative responses to some endemic problems affecting partners and communities.
- 26 The ambitions of the Council and its partners are based on a broad understanding of underlying local need. The community strategy, and its refresh, were both informed by a wide range of consultation processes, aimed at strengthening the Council's understanding of the needs of the various groups and communities across the district. This included the 'Worth The Tax?' interactive roadshow which saw cabinet members and officers touring the District surveying attitudes, the Youth Summit of 2007, health MOT days designed to raise health awareness and identify local issues among older people, and increasingly sophisticated use of the data on resident needs and attitudes captured by the 'nonstopgov' software package used by the council customer contact centre. This improved information has helped reshape the Council's ambitions, with heightened resident concerns about issues of global warming being incorporated into the Council's vision for local sustainability, a higher priority being given to work with children and young people and more targeted activity to increase the health of older people.

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

- 27** The Council and its partners have a generally good understanding of changes in local need across the district, but only a limited knowledge of the needs of newer minority ethnic migrants. Evolving concerns in local parishes are now becoming apparent to all thanks to the imaginative and often highly sophisticated approaches to completing parish plans. A better understanding of shifting needs in areas of multiple deprivation has come through from initiatives such as 'Fairfields Together' in the most deprived ward in Market Drayton. The Council has responded to potential challenges to community cohesion by a concerted public campaign against hate crimes. But there is still work to be done to fully meet the needs of minority ethnic communities, and especially migrant workers, even though much groundwork has been put in, including with the County Council on travellers and with the Polish community. As a result, the changing picture of local need, though increasingly closely monitored, and shared with partners, is not fully complete and the Community Strategy does not yet fully reflect the changing needs of the range of minority groups.
- 28** The Council is developing an innovative structure to deliver some key ambitions. It has ambitious plans to address the key economic and community challenges for the district through the establishment of the Community Asset Trust (CAT). This new and independent delivery vehicle, the first of its kind in the country, will use the £10 million receipts from the sale of the council housing stock as well as land transfers from the Council, to create a new set of socially aware enterprises that will in turn generate further new funding for community projects. The Council can demonstrate to partners and communities that it is committed to developing methods to deliver long term improvements in agreed priority areas that will be apparent to communities.

## Prioritisation

- 29** The Council's performance in this area is adequate. The Council has used its understanding of local demographic trends to develop key priorities that flow from its overall ambitions and reflect county, regional and national priorities. Most consultation is good, and the progress towards achieving targets is transparent. Target setting is increasingly SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Timed), but is capable of further refinement, especially on the economic development aims. Partnerships work well, both in terms of action planning and delivery. The Council has made decisions on what are, and what are not priorities, and has shifted resources accordingly. But the needs and views of groups at risk of disadvantage, and especially minorities, do not feature consistently at all stages of the prioritisation process.

- 30 The Council's priorities have been developed in response to its assessment of local needs. The Council has developed a wide range of surveys at service and corporate level to establish a clear picture of local need. Local people are regularly asked for their views on Council priorities, for example in the annual Quality of Life survey. The results of these surveys are reflected in the choice of priorities, and the Council reports back on progress through the Best Value Performance Plan, as well as the 'State of the District' report, which also makes clear how these local priorities are reconciled with regional and national priorities. As a result, repeat surveys have shown that residents continue to believe that the Council's priorities are relevant to their needs.
- 31 Priorities are well understood internally and externally. They have all party support and staff throughout the organisation are well aware of them and of how their work links to their delivery. Partners have a clear understanding of the priorities and of their role in achieving them. When consulted again in the 2007 Quality of Life survey, residents reconfirmed their support for the priorities identified, while asking for a sharper focus on climate change and sustainable development.
- 32 Targets for delivering the priorities are inconsistent. SMART outcome targets up to 2010 are in place for each of the seven key priority outcomes. Most are effective. For example the numerical and satisfaction targets on waste and street cleaning and community safety running through to 2009 aim to make a measurable difference to the lives of local residents. But one or two of the key priority targets, even though they are ostensibly SMART, fall short of the generally high standard. For example, on the economy, the targets seek increases in the numbers of new jobs and businesses, rather than addressing the significant local challenges of low skills and wages.
- 33 The Council has made decisions on what are priorities, and what are not, and has shifted resources accordingly. Museums and the arts were declared non-priorities and funding was shifted to the seven key priority outcomes. Decisions were also taken to transfer valuable resources such as Ellesmere Town Hall to the community, outsource the swimming pool in Wem and Maurice Chandler Sports Centre, the waste management service and the Council housing stock, to allow scarce resources to be deployed more efficiently and effectively.
- 34 Service planning enables identified community priorities to be integrated into service design and delivery. In response to comments from the pilot Area Forum in Whitchurch the Council and the County have coordinated their litter collection at roundabouts. Local people can see that the Council acts upon issues they have raised. Community concerns about anti-social behaviour outside the swimming pools in Market Drayton and Whitchurch prompted the installation of new access restrictions and CCTV cameras, which have resolved the problem.
- 35 Service plans are reviewed and challenged to ensure they link effectively to the delivery of corporate strategies and outcomes. This process highlighted the need for the draft Benefits and Homelessness service plan to make a more overt link between functions, achievements and corporate outcomes. Services are reminded early in the planning cycle of the need to develop practical measures to deliver corporate outcomes.

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**16** Comprehensive Performance Assessment | What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?

- 36** Service planning has shifted focus towards empowering both staff and local communities, but this has not yet been consistently extended either to junior staff, or to groups at risk of disadvantage. From a prescriptive, top down approach to service planning which often excluded or downplayed input from below or outside a tangible shift in internal culture now gives junior staff a greater voice in policy development, though the recent staff survey reveals that there is still lost ground to be made up.
- 37** Externally, the Council now looks to stakeholders to help set the future action plans, but not enough groups at risk of disadvantage are being drawn in. The new shared approach to action planning is evident from the new play strategy, and from the recent Youth Summit, at which the young people who volunteered to participate were given control of the agenda, and key follow up decisions. Some groups at risk of disadvantage, such as the residents of the Fairfield Estate in Market Drayton, or people at risk of homelessness, are now feeding views into action planning. But some others at risk of disadvantage, especially minorities, have not been so involved, and are still the subjects of, rather than participants in, Council decision-making.

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

### Capacity

- 38 The Council is performing well in this area. Decision making is timely, transparent and effective. Working relationships are good at all levels and councillors and staff are increasingly able to focus their energy on improving services. Managerial leadership is strong. Training and development for councillors and staff has been a priority and has helped to drive service improvement. The Council is a constructive partner in county-wide preparations for local government reorganisation. Capacity building with partners is adequate, and improving. Financial management is sound and achievement of Value for Money is adequate and improving. Customer access is now good. Procurement is now generating significant savings, and contributes strategically. As a result the Council demonstrates it has sufficient capacity to sustain and increase the rate of improvement.
- 39 Decision making processes are timely and transparent and are delivering continuous improvement. This is clearly recognised by partners. Since the move to a Leader and Cabinet structure in 2006 Portfolio holders take the lead in setting and presenting policy internally, and difficult decisions are taken, and sustained. Decision making is timely, and supports achievement of priorities and objectives with the forward plan integrated with the key planning and strategy milestones, for example, the decision to transfer the Council's housing stock was positively managed by members at all stages.
- 40 Working relationships between councillors and officers are appropriate and constructive. Meetings between portfolio holders and heads of service are held at least monthly and focus on the big picture, and not minor operational matters. In deciding how to allocate the 2007/08 efficiency savings of £152,000, portfolio holders discussed with service managers potential schemes within their areas and then made the final decisions based on those judged to be most closely linked to speedier delivery of corporate priorities. Councillors and officers have developed clear and effective roles that help them remain focused on improving performance and achievement of Council priorities.

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

- 41** Scrutiny is well supported and is performing effectively. The Scrutiny Committee has benefited in the past three years from peer mentoring and training, from implementing the findings of an independent review and from the appointment of dedicated officer support. As a result Scrutiny consistently plays an effective policy development and performance role through the work of its task and finish groups, as is clear from the impact on performance on street cleansing, homelessness and concessionary bus fares; for example the report on street cleansing led to the reorganisation of the service structure and the creation of a highly effective rapid reaction team.
- 42** The Council maintains good and improving standards of ethics, efficiency and integrity. Extensive councillor training has paid dividends in terms of the quality and impact of internal leadership and decision-making, which has helped bring about the major change from an officer-led Council to one led by councillors. Councillor development programmes have also had positive results in development control as well as scrutiny. The findings of an ethical audit in 2006, which found no serious failings, have been developed into an action plan, which is now being implemented.
- 43** Risk management, previously a weakness, is now good. All policy and strategy documents require assessment of risk, detailed staff guidance on the assessment and mitigation of risk is regularly refreshed, and any concerns arising from regular reviews of the strategic and operational risk register are reported to members sitting on the performance management board. The recent transfer of housing stock demonstrates the increasing effectiveness of this process. A range of potential risks to the Council were identified well in advance of the ballot, and steps were taken to mitigate them; for example by outsourcing the payroll to a neighbouring council. A new Governance, Audit and Risk Group (GARD) has recently been established, amalgamating previous sub-groups on internal control and risk. As a result, the process of further improving standards of governance is being given greater momentum and coherence.
- 44** Work to develop internal capacity has strengthened the Council's ability to deliver its priorities. There is a strong and innovative training and development programme. The People Strategy and the accompanying Workforce Development Plan provide a sound framework for meeting demand and are regularly refreshed. A councillor development programme has been in place since 2006 and is underpinned by annual assessments. The Council's staff who have coped well with the change that the rate of improvement has required, continue to demonstrate a positive attitude to improvement and the achievement of corporate objectives. Past problems with sickness have been largely resolved, with 27 long term sickness cases managed in the last two years so there are currently zero cases. Skill gaps among officers, both individually and across tiers, are identified and addressed through detailed analysis of annual staff appraisals and performance development plans. The effectiveness of developments to fill these gaps is also assessed through an online portal which monitors changes in staffs own assessment of their skills. Specialist skills are developed in areas such as development control and customer service, the latter contributing to high satisfaction rates among customers. As a result, staff and Councillors are increasingly well-equipped to carry out their roles in improving local services.

- 45 Financial management is sound. The medium term financial strategy is good, and integrates business and financial planning. Reserves are healthy and the Council is debt-free. The budget setting process is comprehensive and fits well into the corporate business planning cycle. Spending patterns are monitored closely within year and there is flexibility to allow underperformance to be targeted. For example the £66,000 increase in the street cleaning budget in 2006/07 with a recurrent additional spend of £48,000, led to improved performance and increased resident satisfaction. Budgets are no longer compartmentalised or kept hidden from view, thus breaking old habits of under spending. Whole life costing is applied to capital projects, which are in turn subject to project management procedures based on Prince 2. In this way financial capacity is available to support continued improvement.
- 46 Achievement of value for money is adequate and is improving. Service costs are historically high, and generally remain so. But a number of steps to improve value for money have been taken. Efficiency savings well in excess of Gershon targets have been made - £66,000 in corporate services in 2006/07, and nearly £995,000 across the Council. Tangible improvement in performance has been achieved with fewer staff, with staff numbers falling from 282 full time equivalents in March 2004 to 268.8 in March 2007. Outsourcing is being used to generate efficiencies in very high cost services, such as waste. The use of improved technology, in the Contact Centre, and in services such as Development Control, is increasing efficiency, effectiveness and accessibility, and has contributed to the fall in overall staff numbers since 2005. The Council has thus been in a position to halve the previous level of increase in Council Tax, as it has done in the past two years, while continuing to improve services. Improving value for money has been recognised by residents; in the annual resident's survey in 2007, 64 per cent of residents felt that the level of council tax they pay for the Council's services represented value for money.
- 47 The Council has built adequate and improving capacity in partnerships. Some Council training programmes are now being made available to partners. Delivery of targets on affordable housing has been materially assisted by close team working with the Shropshire Housing Officers Group (SHOG), with the wider cross county body on homelessness (SHHOG) and with local RSLs. The installation of CCTV systems to address the fear of crime among vulnerable communities in the District and diversionary activity programmes to address anti-social behaviour among young people in Whitchurch and Market Drayton have come about through improved co-operation in the local Community Safety Partnership. Strategic partnership with Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) has improved performance on affordable housing targets. The North Shropshire Play Partnership has played a key role in developing forward plans for local play provision. Investing the £10million receipt from the housing stock transfer into the new Community Asset Trust is intended to take capacity building within the community to another level.

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

- 48** Partnership working with the voluntary and community sector has been strengthened. In developing new strategies such as the consultation programme the Council is beginning to routinely incorporate actions to ensure that the capacity of the voluntary and community sectors is enhanced as part of the work. The Compact with the local voluntary umbrella organisation is a key framework for the future.
- 49** The needs of the local community are taken into account in developing capacity. The Customer Contact Centre replaced the six separate customer points at the main Council office in Wem with one that provides easy visitor access, including for people with disabilities. Investment in IT and telephony ensures that calls are answered quickly and effectively, with issues of concern to residents quickly pinpointed and addressed. This has helped deliver high customer satisfaction with the centre. The Council is better able to respond to the needs of service users.
- 50** The Council has successfully ensured that the workforce is generally representative of the community at large. The implementation of the findings of a Staff Disability Audit in 2006 identified the council employed more persons with a disability than previously thought. The Council has now committed to ongoing standards of support to those with a disability and have received a 'Disability Two Ticks' award. The Council successfully managed the transfer to single status in 2005 and has achieved Level 2 of the Equalities Standard for Local Government. It is actively working towards achieving Level 3 within the next twelve months. The proportion of staff from BME communities is above the percentage in the District, though the Council has yet to respond to the recent influx of migrant workers in building capacity. All this has helped relate the process of capacity building to meeting local need.
- 51** The Council is using procurement to support its wider objectives, including the development of the voluntary and community sector, and the growth of local businesses. An options assessment on procurement which looked at a range of collaborative possibilities for the Council, led to a partnership with Merseyside Fire and Rescue. With a combined annual spend of over £100million; this partnership has generated cashable savings for the Council of over £66,000 since April 2007 and significant efficiencies in invoicing and customer service. The implementation of the new procurement strategy, backed up by new dedicated staff, is giving due priority to developing the local market and procuring more sustainable products. Outsourcing of waste management is more cost-effective, and is intended to improve performance. As a result Council procurement is now a tool to help deliver key priorities, as well as save money.

## Performance management

- 52** The Council is performing well in this area. A strong performance culture is in place, supported by effective systems of monitoring and management. There are good links between finance and performance reporting systems. Performance information is integrated with data on cost, quality and user satisfaction to produce well rounded judgements on the need for improvement. The clear escalation processes provide for rapid and effective troubleshooting, and ensures that Councillors make strategic decisions about performance management. Benchmarking and learning from others are the norm, and the system enables effective use of that data to drive continuous improvement. Opening up performance management meetings to partners is allowing them to both contribute and learn. Complaint management procedures have improved, but still have ground to make up to work well.
- 53** Performance management is rigorous and focused on achieving outcomes for local people. There is a well established performance escalation process, which works quickly and effectively. Monthly performance surgeries including representatives from across services are held to review performance on key performance indicators, to identify and find solutions to under performance. They look at the detailed reports on all performance indicators, resolve simple problems of underperformance. Issues requiring deeper study, or redirection of resources, are reported up for action as appropriate to the performance management board, cabinet and scrutiny. The Performance Management Board has recently agreed a series of actions on Affordable Housing following receipt of a reference under the escalation process and the resultant actions agreed are helping to produce better outcomes.
- 54** Councillors are developing a record of focused involvement in addressing under performance. The Performance Management Board discusses referrals on under performing PIs through the escalation process and this enables councillors to discuss options and make recommendations for improvement. For example the Board has made wide ranging recommendations on changes to services following discussions of the reasons for under achievement on affordable housing and waste minimisation targets. The sharp focus that this process brings to performance management ensures prompt and effective removal of all barriers to improved delivery. It ensures that councillors are closely involved in any strategic decisions relating to performance. As a result the performance culture in the Council is deeply embedded, to the point where other councils are now looking to learn from North Shropshire.

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

- 55** Processes for linking resources to priorities work well. Finance and performance information are linked to priorities in an increasingly effective manner. The Corporate Plan Tracker mechanism reports progress on a quarterly basis on a basket of 99 actions related to the seven key priority outcomes. Cost information on service actions is reported on a quarterly basis. A new prioritisation matrix for the Performance Plus monitoring system was developed in-house in conjunction with govmetric in 2007 and its application to joint working has already been shared with partners. This new matrix plots performance against cost, satisfaction and quality, and enables robust decisions to be made about reprioritisation and redirection of resources.
- 56** Resource management is linked effectively to management of performance. Performance information is integrated with financial data at each monthly performance surgery, together with information on service quality and resident satisfaction. The resultant analysis enables the Council to look strategically at the trends of these components of each performance issue, and make decisions based on a firm understanding of their likely impact. The decision to commit £32,000 towards more staffing resources to bolster capacity to avoid overstretch during the development of the new young people's strategy is an example of this process. This means that the close links between finance, performance and the Council's seven key priority outcomes ensures that performance and financial management remain jointly focused on achieving the Council's ambitions, and drive improvement.
- 57** Corporate working to improve performance is strong. The management restructure of 2005 unlocked the Council's potential by breaking down barriers between services, and between tiers of management. The challenging approach to service delivery in performance surgeries has reinforced this culture of collective responsibility, with services mutually supportive in their efforts to continuously improve outcomes. Poor performance on the delivery of affordable housing was identified as an issue and in response a streamlining of the planning and housing development process and has resulted in significant improvements with numbers rising from 27 in 2004/05 to 55 in 2005/06. In 2006/07, 26 were completed with construction of 99 started in 2007/08 and a further 423 having received planning permission. This results in improved services for both partners and residents.
- 58** The performance management of partnerships is adequate, and improving. The Council has led the way in establishing clear monitoring procedures for performance data in the delivery groups for the NSP. Partners now attend and contribute to the Council's performance surgeries at which performance against targets in the NSP and LAA is assessed. Portfolio holders actively participate in the monitoring and management of performance in the relevant delivery groups of the NSP. This builds partner capacity and commitment to the achievement of shared targets.

Comprehensive Performance Assessment | What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve? **23**

- 59** The Council and its partners make systematic use of information to drive continuous improvement in outcomes. The Council learned from the County Council on the importance of detailed and timely performance information, acquiring its own version of the performance plus software. Service managers use data sharing programmes such as SPARSE to benchmark their service performance. They are also encouraged to go out and find the best performers in their service nationally, including in the private sector, and learn from them. For example, the innovative work on staff development came from study of a number of models in the public and private sector. This has resulted in improved arrangements and performance in key areas such as homelessness, procurement, human resources, and performance management where the Council adopted the West Mercia Police arrangements for Surgeries.
- 60** The Council is not yet systematically using information from complaints received to monitor and improve performance. The customer complaints system has become more accessible and effective, as the Ombudsman has recognised. The Council performance data is readily accessible to the public, allowing residents to track progress against targets. The logging and monitoring of complaints by the contact centre is used to pinpoint specific instances of service underperformance. But complaint data is not routinely analysed on a corporate basis, to identify trends in complaints, either by service or geographically. And feedback to customers is inadequate, with the 2007 resident survey still showing levels of dissatisfaction with complaint handling. As a result the Council is missing opportunities to maximise the return from their user feedback.

## What has been achieved?

### Achievement and improvement

- 61 The Council is performing well in this area. It is achieving high quality in some services and most of its priority areas. It is working well in partnership to deliver outcomes that are benefiting local people. In each of the four priority themes, the action plans of the Council dovetail with the action plans of the delivery groups of the NSP.
- 62 Council services are performing well overall. 34 per cent of the Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs) for 2006/07 are in the best performing category (best quartile) and 60 per cent are above average performance. In the past three years, 70 per cent of all comparable BVPIs have improved (against an all district average of between 64.8 and 67.2 per cent); while 54 per cent have improved in 2006/07 (against an all district average of 47-49 per cent). Most of these improvements have been comparatively greater than those achieved elsewhere, lifting the Council's BVPI performance up one, two and sometimes three quartiles. Recent data provided by the Council shows that 94 per cent of its targets in its four priority areas are on track or have been completed. The Council's own survey data points to rising resident satisfaction with the Council. The annual residents' survey in 2005 found that 46 per cent were satisfied with the Council. This rose to 50 per cent in the national BVPI survey of 2006 and 54 per cent in the annual residents' survey of 2007.
- 63 Performance against the four corporate priority themes is as follows.

### A community with children and young people at the heart

- 64 The Council is making fair progress in this area, with building blocks now in place for further significant improvement. The target is to get more young people involved over a three year period in organised activities to help them become more active citizens.

- 65** Involvement in organised activity has increased and targets are being met. Since January 2006, 678 children and young people have participated in a wide range of arts, sport and team building activities organised by the Council working in partnership with local schools, Barnados and HomeStart, with more than half of the participants coming from the two local estates with the highest levels of multiple deprivation in the district. These programmes have run in conjunction with Council-run community programmes providing free transport for participants from deprived neighbourhoods. New sports coaching arrangements in smaller communities, such as Hadnall, have been successfully established. The Council supported Market Drayton Town Council who led on the construction of a skate park in the town. Working in conjunction with the North Shropshire Education Business Partnership, six year nine pupils from areas of multiple deprivation undertake work experience at the Council each year, and around 300 attend local forums with local firms to discuss training and employment opportunities. Feedback from participants on these activities and other initiatives has been positive, and a wider range of young people from across the district are now participating.
- 66** Young people are actively engaged in shaping policies aimed at them. The local user group, the Young People Participation Team, have been involved in consultation with the Council on the Corporate Plan, parish plans and the new play strategy. This process resulted in the first ever district Youth Summit, which took place in 2007, with the participation of 50 young people with a range of specific follow up activities now being actively discussed. Council policies and practices are more relevant to the needs of young people.
- 67** Local satisfaction with sports and leisure and parks and open spaces, however, remains low, though choice and opportunity for participation are above average. To address this, and to build on existing successes, a new and ambitious partnership-based Play Strategy will begin to be implemented in the latter half of this financial year, aimed at significantly improving access, activities and facilities for children and young people across the district. The building blocks for future improvement have therefore been put in place.

## **A healthier community and healthy independent older people**

- 68** The Council is making good progress in this area. The target is to have more members of the community being healthier, more active and with longer life expectancy by 2010. The Council works closely with a range of partners, including across the County in pursuit of LAA targets, and in the district has taken the lead on the development of the approach. This is three pronged, with successful investment in activity, prevention and access to facilities.

- 69 Activity based programmes have increased in scope and impact. The Council's 'Leisure Card' scheme has led to significant increased usage of Council run sports and fitness facilities at Whitchurch and Market Drayton, especially among older people. The three main schemes for older people, involving chair based exercise classes, the GP referral scheme, and Walking For Health, are drawing in hundreds of people a week at venues across the district. Feedback from these activities has been highly positive, with 84.8 per cent of the 137 participants in the 2007 evaluation survey reporting a tangible improvement in their health.
- 70 Preventive approaches are making a positive impact. The sexual advice and health clinic (SHY) in Market Drayton for young people has contributed to teenage conception rates that are below national and regional averages. 'Healthy Living Days', which cover nutrition, exercise, and fall prevention, have been run in nine sheltered accommodation venues across the District, again working in partnership with the Community Council. More than 500 people have benefited from the Council's programme of MOT health checks. Healthy Eating initiatives have been run in parallel with wider LAA efforts. The initial impact has been positive, in terms of feedback and healthier lifestyles, for example in sheltered accommodation.
- 71 Access to services has improved and is now good. A Service Level Agreement with the Thomas Adams Sports Centre in Wem and the Lakelands Sports centre in Ellesmere have extended the range and availability of activities for adults and children. The Council has committed funds to the Market Drayton swimming pool, to accommodate fitness classes for older people. Section 106 agreements with developers have generated over £135,000 for local play facilities in the last three years and plans to further improve local open space provision have been addressed elsewhere in this report. Investment in service signposting for carers is now set to expand to include training for carers. The introduction of the most comprehensive concessionary travel scheme in Shropshire for older people, which allows for free travel at all times, and to destinations outside the District, has resulted in the issue of over 7000 bus passes and an increase of 65 per cent in local bus journeys, according to data from local bus operators. As a result of Parish Planning work in Hadnall and partnership work with the PCT, residents can now collect prescriptions once a week from the village hall and a health visitor service is being trialled once a month in the village hall. Residents across the district have improved access to health and leisure facilities.

## **A sustainable community**

- 72 The Council is making good progress in this area. There are three key targets; improved access to affordable housing; more jobs, businesses and inward investment; and increases in waste recycling.

- 73** After a slow start, significant progress has been made on affordable housing. A new housing strategy refresh has produced a more stringent, and a more strategic approach, including a renewed partnership with Registered Social landlords. In 2006/07, 26 Affordable Houses were completed with construction of 99 started in 2007/08 and a further 423 having received planning permission. The proportion of council stock meeting the decent homes standard increased from 76 per cent in 2004/05 to 85 per cent in 2006/07, with the proportion of vulnerable people in non-decent homes also falling, and the subsequent transfer to a non-profit landlord was firmly predicated on further improvements. A new policy for operating private sector housing grants based on an assessment of property need was introduced, and take up has had an impact on the availability of housing. The merger of the benefit and homelessness teams in 2006 has driven a significant improvement in this key local concern, and performance is now good. The implementation of a new choice-based preventive approach in conjunction with the local Homelessness Action Partnership has resulted in a 41 per cent reduction in cases of unintentional homelessness. A new policy for disabled housing adaptation grants has cut claims processing to an average of eight days, and 47 local people with disabilities have benefited from these grants to date. As a result of all this, more local people now have access to affordable housing, of a decent standard.
- 74** Work to stimulate the economy is good. The net increase in jobs, businesses and inward investment has been above the targets the Council set itself. The Council's Market Towns Initiative and the creation, with Council support, of the North Shropshire Economic Forum (NSEF) have helped support a number of private development initiatives, contributing to a reported net increase in jobs in the district of 207 in 2006/07, against a target of 200. Council partnership work has also created and consolidated new purpose built trading sites in each of the four towns, which all have now near 100 per cent occupancy rates. The Council attracted a major national firm to the new site at Sych Farm. The most recent development, the Ellesmere Business Park has created 12 new serviced small business premises and combined with other three sites, has ensured that the target of 20 new businesses has been exceeded. Inward investment has increased on the back of all this, plus the recent expansion of key local employers such as Mullers, and the major projects in train in Ellesmere. The Council's work has made the area more attractive to external investors and businesses.
- 75** Future regeneration plans are sound. An action plan aimed at taking advantage of local technology industry growth to the south of the district has been established following a study on local high incidence of home working, and is about to be implemented. The creation of the Community Asset Trust, into which the Council is investing the £10million receipt from the housing stock transfer, as well as land, is a key building block for further consolidation and improvement.

- 76 Waste collection and recycling has improved significantly, and is now good. The combined recycling rate has risen from 28.77 per cent in 2004/05 to an above target 45 per cent in 2007, which is among the best performing in England. The waste minimisation strategy introduced in 2006 has again exceeded target, with continuing quarterly reductions in the volume of waste collected. Outsourcing of the service in October 2007 was predicated upon future improvements on both counts.

## A safer and stronger community

- 77 The Council is making good progress in this area. The ambitious target is to increase the percentages of residents feeling safe, including through improvements in street cleanliness.
- 78 Performance on crime is good. The local Community Safety Partnership has contributed to an above target 26 per cent reduction in an already low crime rate since 2003/04. Domestic burglaries, vehicle crimes, racial incidents have all fallen by more than the local targeted decrease since 2005/06. As a result fear of crime, though increasing slightly year on year, is still well below the regional and national averages.
- 79 The Council is an active and committed partner in successful initiatives to reduce crime, and fear of crime. Diversionary activities, alcohol free zones and access restrictions have all reduced both the numbers of noise related complaints in Market Drayton and the incidence of anti-social behaviour in Whitchurch, with additional CCTV cameras put in place to help achieve this. The Fairfields Project in Market Drayton is reducing crime and anti-social behaviour and improving street cleanliness through projects that empower the local community. The Safer Nightlife project with the Council working closely with local licensees was nominated for a national award. The 'Safer by Design' approach to the local Council run car parks has led to the award of two 'Park Mark' awards. Strict taxi regulation enforcement in partnership with the Police and VOSA has led to safer taxi services locally. The Housing Team has targeted activity at young homeless people across the district and the Benefits team has run joint awareness campaigns and roadshows with the CAB to ensure that residents who have difficulty accessing services can maximise their incomes. With domestic violence on the increase locally, regionally and nationally, partnership work with local housing associations and with the county-wide safety partnership has led to the acquisition of two new units in Whitchurch for victims of domestic violence, with four families offered assistance in 2007. The actions of the Council and its partners are leading to tangible benefits for local people.

- 80 The Council is contributing effectively to work to enhance community cohesion. The Council's handyperson scheme has been expanded to undertake vulnerability surveys and small scale security works in older peoples' properties. With the County Council and other partners the Council is using food safety visits to establish wider dialogue with minority enterprises, improved dialogue between traveller and settled communities and the establishment of three local Hate Crime reporting centres, as part of a wider approach to raising awareness and promoting greater tolerance. Action on reported racial incidents is meanwhile best quartile.
- 81 Targets on street cleaning have been met, with 95 per cent of streets meeting BVPI 199a standards in 2006/07, which is best quartile. The specific aim of addressing local fear of crime has been met by improved performance on abandoned vehicles, increased investment in street light cleansing, the introduction of mobile CCTV to target fly-tippers and graffiti, and static cameras in litter bins. Machinery to remove chewing gum has been acquired, and a rapid response team established, with rapid clean up of hotspots reassuring residents. As a result, resident satisfaction with street cleanliness has improved from 65 per cent in 2005 to 69 per cent in 2007.

## 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 North Shropshire 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.