

Corporate Assessment Report

March 2008



Corporate Assessment

Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council

The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively, to achieve high quality local services for the public. Our remit covers around 11,000 bodies in England, which between them spend more than £180 billion of public money each year. Our work covers local government, health, housing, community safety and fire and rescue services.

As an independent watchdog, we provide important information on the quality of public services. As a driving force for improvement in those services, we provide practical recommendations and spread best practice. As an independent auditor, we ensure that public services are good value for money and that public money is properly spent.

Copies of this report

If you require further copies of this report, or a copy in large print, in Braille, on tape, or in a language other than English, please call 0844 798 7070.

© Audit Commission 2008

For further information on the work of the Commission please contact:

Audit Commission, 1st Floor, Millbank Tower, Millbank, London SW1P 4HQ

Tel: 020 7828 1212 Fax: 020 7976 6187 Textphone (minicom): 020 7630 0421

www.audit-commission.gov.uk

Contents

Introduction	4
Executive summary	5
Areas for improvement	7
Summary of assessment scores	8
Context	9
The locality	9
The Council	10
What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?	11
Ambition	11
Prioritisation	13
What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?	16
Capacity	16
Performance management	18
What has been achieved?	22
Achievement and Improvement	22
Appendix 1 - Framework for Corporate Assessment	26

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 Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council has made considerable progress since the last corporate assessment in 2004 when it was rated as 'weak'. Its overall performance has now improved to 'good'.
- 4 The Council is clear about its ambitions for the area and this has resulted in the successful delivery of priorities. It requested external help from the government, setting up an improvement board. As a result, all necessary improvement areas have been addressed. It has had greatest success in clarifying its ambitions for the area and delivering improvements on the ground that can be seen by the public. Its progress has resulted in the withdrawal of the external improvement board. However the Council recognises there is more to do and has replaced this with its own internal improvement board. It is highly respected as a partner and is persistent in ensuring shared projects produce results. The building blocks for continued improvement, such as the clarification of roles of councillors and officers and a sound performance management framework, are either in place or being developed.
- 5 The Council and its partners have a shared vision for the future articulated in the sustainable community plan (SCP). It has ensured that this vision is incorporated into the Council's corporate plan which covers the same period 2007-2021. It is focused on improving the quality of life of residents and closing the gap between the most disadvantaged in the borough and the most advantaged in the rest of Warwickshire. Closing the gap is the overarching theme of the Warwickshire local area agreement (LAA) which the Council was active in developing. Ambitions are informed by a good needs analysis and wide consultation with all parts of the community although the written plans do not fully outline the sense of place they are intending to develop. The Council provides effective leadership and purposeful partnership working.
- 6 The Council has refined its priorities which are firmly based on its ambitions and consultation. Staff and partners understand and share the priorities and work well together to deliver them. The Council has set long-term targets and is currently developing cross-cutting action plans for each priority with interim milestones and targets. However supporting strategic and service plans are not fully aligned with the corporate plan and the alignment of budgets with priorities is not fully developed.
- 7 Roles and responsibilities of councillors and officers are generally clear and leadership has improved. Decision-making is more effective and councillors focus on strategic responsibilities although scrutiny does not provide sufficient challenge to the executive. Plans are in place to improve key areas such as workforce planning, value for money and procurement, but these have had limited impact so far.

- 8 It has a sound performance management framework which provides the basis for target setting, monitoring and adjusting performance and contributes to service improvements. Some aspects such as reporting against priorities and linking resources with performance are less well developed.
- 9 There is an improved customer focus and accessibility achieved by opening the contact centre and one stop shop in Nuneaton and improving electronic access to services. However, although consultation for the SCP and the corporate plan were based on consultation with all parts of the community, equalities and diversity issues are not systematically integrated into service action plans, service delivery or performance management arrangements.
- 10 The Council is achieving good outcomes for local people based on its aims and priorities. Its performance in its priority areas is improving well; is generally above average; and in some services among the best performing in the country. High customer satisfaction reflects improvements that can be seen on the ground particularly in regeneration and job creation with schemes like the redevelopment of Camp Hill, the Ropewalk shopping centre and Bermuda Park industrial and leisure areas. Leading effective partnerships and the use of leverage, such as using council land to promote development, are catalysts for these achievements. Health improvements are proving more difficult in an area with some of the greatest health inequalities nationally.

Areas for improvement

- 11 The Council should improve the capacity of councillors to fulfil their roles in delivering better services. Steps have been taken to improve the understanding of roles resulting in cabinet members taking a more strategic role helped by the restructuring of overview and scrutiny. However, as cabinet members still do not take full responsibility for and ownership of their portfolios, for example by subjecting themselves to scrutiny, they are not fully held to account. Stronger cabinet responsibility and a focus on performance management both by cabinet members and by the scrutiny function will enable the Council to ensure they are achieving the ambitions of the community.
- 12 The Council should ensure that equalities and diversity issues are systematically integrated into setting priorities, determining action plans, delivering services and managing performance. Although it has taken these issues into account through extensive consultation with all sectors of the community in agreeing its vision and ambitions and has plans in place to assess the impact of its services on vulnerable groups, the approach needs to be more strategic. By developing this approach it will ensure that services better meet the needs of all parts of the community including those at risk of disadvantage.
- 13 The Council needs to develop a more focused approach towards achieving its priorities. It has set narrow targets for each of its 12 priorities. The developing cross-cutting action plans for each priority should include more comprehensive targets and milestones. It needs to ensure that all its strategic plans and service development plans fully align with the corporate plan and the cross cutting action plans. It also needs to consider whether its priorities should be ranked so that it has a framework for making future decisions about allocating resources. In this way, the Council can ensure that it is on track and it has the necessary resources to deliver high priority services.

Summary of assessment scores

Table 1

Headline questions	Theme	Score*	Weighted score
What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?	Ambition	3	6
	Prioritisation	2	4
What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?	Capacity	2	4
	Performance management	2	4
What has been achieved?	Achievement and Improvement	3	21
Weighted score			39
CPA category			Good
*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

- 14 Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council is located in the county of Warwickshire in the West Midlands region of England. The borough is in the centre of England with good road, rail and air links with the rest of the country and within easy commuting distance of Coventry, Birmingham and Leicester. It is the smallest of the five Warwickshire districts but with the second largest population it has relatively high population density, mostly in the towns of Nuneaton and Bedworth.
- 15 The borough has a population of 120,700 with 6.5 per cent from black and ethnic minority groups. This is well below the regional and national figures of 13.8 per cent and 13 per cent respectively. The borough ranks 112 out of 354 English councils on deprivation (where 1 is the most deprived), and it is the most deprived in Warwickshire with some significant areas of deprivation. Two super output areas in the borough are within the most ten per cent deprived nationally.
- 16 The area has changed considerably over the past 20 years. The decline of the coal industry, other extractive industries and heavy engineering in the 1980s had a significant impact, particularly in Bedworth. This impact extends to the physical appearance of parts of the borough where mining and extraction have left a legacy of derelict industrial sites. Regeneration programmes since then have resulted in sites being cleaned up for alternative use and new jobs to the area, especially in service and distribution. Although unemployment has fallen to 3.1 per cent and is below the regional and national averages of 5.2 per cent and 5.0 per cent, it is still the highest in Warwickshire. Wages are comparatively low; the average income of £19,100 compares with an average of £22,400 for Warwickshire and £23,200 for England. Although there are affluent areas in the borough, 83 per cent of dwellings fall within council tax bands A to C compared to 76 per cent regionally.
- 17 Crime is falling although it is generally high. In 2005/06, the rates of burglaries and thefts of vehicles were in the highest 25 per cent of districts nationally while thefts from vehicles were about average. Robberies have fallen from above to below average over three years.
- 18 Nuneaton and Bedworth suffers from some of the greatest health inequalities nationally. Female life expectancy, deaths from heart disease and stroke, teenage pregnancy, obesity, the levels of healthy eating, diabetes and feeling 'in poor health' are all significantly worse in the borough than the national average and below the average for the West Midlands. As a result, the borough has been declared a 'spearhead' area which means that it is eligible for Department of Health funding to help it to make faster progress in reducing health inequalities.

The Council

- 19 Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council has 34 councillors, currently 20 Labour and 14 Conservative. The Council has been governed by the same political party since 1974 with the current leader for 22 years. In 2002, significant changes were made to its operation. Ward boundaries were revised, increasing the number of wards from 15 to 17 but reducing the number of councillors from 45 to 34. At the same time, it also moved to a Cabinet model of governance. Unusually, half of the councillors face elections alternately every two years.
- 20 The Cabinet consists of six councillors each with a portfolio: Finance and Civic Affairs (held by the Leader); Health and Environment (held by the Deputy Leader); Central Services; Culture and Recreation; Housing; and Planning and Development. There are three Overview and Scrutiny Panels (OSPs) with the remits to promote the social, economic and environmental well-being of residents respectively. There is a standards committee and three regulatory committees; planning, licensing and appeals.
- 21 The Council's officer structure comprises a Chief Executive and two Corporate Directors. There are ten service units each headed by an Assistant Director as well as a legal team and a democratic services team.
- 22 The Council's net revenue budget for 2007/08 is £18.1 million with a further £3.2 million to be spent on capital projects. The housing revenue account for 2007/08 is £16.1 million with a further £6.2 million for capital projects. The Council's revenue budget represents a band D council tax charge of £191. Council tax has not been increased over the last two years.
- 23 The Council works in partnership with a range of public, private and voluntary bodies. The Nuneaton and Bedworth Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) was formed in 2003 and published its third sustainable community plan in 2007 covering the period up to 2021. It is chaired by the Council's chief executive. The Council is also a signed up partner in the Warwickshire wide LAA.

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

Ambition

- 24 The Council is performing well in this area. It has a clear vision of improving the quality of life of the people of Nuneaton and Bedworth up to 2021. This is focused on closing the gap of advantage and opportunity between the borough and the rest of Warwickshire so that there are improved employment and training opportunities, better health and better housing. Councillors led the development of ambitions based on extensive data analysis and wide consultation with all parts of the community. The ambitions in the sustainable community plan and the corporate plan are aligned and directly linked to the countywide local area agreement. While the sense of place that the ambitions are intended to develop is clear to the Council and its partners, these are not fully spelt out in the written plans. Good partnership working underpins key Council ambitions. There are good examples of community leadership. Effective leadership and purposeful partnership working ensure that opportunities to make improvements are secured.
- 25 The Council's vision contained in the Corporate Plan 2007-2021 is clear and articulates well the aspirations of the community.

'By 2021 we shall achieve the greatest improvement in the quality of life and social justice in Warwickshire, providing value for money services in a safe and pleasant environment.'

This vision is supported by four aims intended to: *improve the quality of life and social justice; reduce crime and the fear of crime; provide a pleasant environment; and provide value for money quality services.* The vision and aims are shared with partners and reflected in the vision and themes in the sustainable community plan which covers the same period. The Council and its partners are clear that Nuneaton and Bedworth will be a place with improved and distinctive retail and business activities which offer an alternative to its larger metropolitan neighbours but not direct competition. They see the change being achieved primarily through regeneration which will offer more jobs and training and improved homes and communities. Although the Council and its partners are clear about the direction in which they are going and what they want the place to be, this is not fully spelled out in the plans. However plans are aligned with the countywide local area agreement (LAA) and consistent with its overarching theme of 'narrowing the gap' between the least and the most disadvantaged. Consequently there is a coherent strategic framework for delivering the ambitions.

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

- 26 The Council and its partners have a comprehensive understanding of local needs informed by consultation and wide statistical analyses. In developing the new SCP the Council led consultation with residents, partners, and over 370 community, voluntary and faith organisations including vulnerable and previously excluded groups. Community road shows in every ward and an online questionnaire widened the consultation. One result of the consultation was an increased emphasis on tackling anti-social behaviour. Councillors from both political groups led the development of the new corporate plan incorporating the research for the SCP. In both new plans reference back to the previous plans ensured continuity while developing ambitions fit for the future. Consequently the plans reflect the views of residents and other stakeholders and are owned by their representatives.
- 27 The Council is proactive and effective in partnership working. Statutory and voluntary sector partners regard its contribution highly and point to considerable improvement in this area over the last three years. Partnership working is purposeful and focused on delivery. For example, the Council has taken a pivotal role in the town centre improvements in both Nuneaton and Bedworth and its drive and determination, at councillor and officer level, have ensured that the extensive regeneration of Camp Hill has stayed on track by securing significant additional funding to supplement its own investment. As part of tackling the relatively poor health in the borough, the Council was proactive in setting up the Healthy Living Network which has secured £1 million of Lottery funding to carry out health improvement initiatives. These examples show flexibility and resolve in tackling issues with others.
- 28 The Council's partnership involvement extends positively beyond Nuneaton and Bedworth. It is a member of the Coventry, Solihull and Warwickshire Sub-Regional Forum which has agreed the growth strategy for the next 20 years. It also recognised the countywide LAA as a significant opportunity to contribute to its aspirations for the area with a greater targeting of resources within Warwickshire. Councillors and officers were strongly involved in developing the agreement and the chief executive shares the lead for one of the six blocks. It is part of an innovative programme at the new justice centre in Nuneaton where police, probation and fire officers, council staff and volunteers from neighbourhood watch schemes are co-located, access shared databases and pool intelligence. Consequently issues important to residents are resolved more effectively.
- 29 The Council has shown good community leadership. It sought an order giving greater powers to the police to deal with alcohol consumption in public places contributing to reducing anti-social behaviour and helping residents feel safer. To prevent tensions between communities it applied for, and was granted, an order stopping a planned rally organised by the British National Party. The Council also worked to reduce the impact on local people of the recent closure of the nearby Peugeot plant in Coventry by liaising closely with the chamber of commerce and the learning and skills council (LSC) in identifying affected individuals and businesses so that maximum use could be made of the support package. These examples show an understanding of issues important to local people and the needs of the more vulnerable.

- 30** The Council takes difficult decisions to support delivery of its ambitions. It acted to demolish homes for the Camp Hill regeneration and lifted a covenant on the Nuneaton Town Football Club ground so that it could relocate, both in the face of strong opposition. This means that the Council shows resolve when considering the needs of the wider community and when major contentious developments are proposed.

Prioritisation

- 31** The Council is performing adequately in this area. Its priorities are based on its ambitions and developed using a needs analysis and consultation. They are understood and shared by staff and partners and the Council works well with partners to deliver them. The Council is focused on improvement and believes that it can deliver all its priorities and so it has not ranked them. However the Council will face decisions about allocating resources among the priorities as a result of a reducing budget settlement for councils and the process to achieve this is not fully developed. Long-term targets have been set but the work on setting milestones and interim targets is still in progress. Strategic plans and service plans are variable in their alignment with the corporate plan and in target setting. Disadvantaged groups are referred to in action plans but meeting their needs is not systematically integrated into the plans.
- 32** Resources are not consistently directed towards priorities. In the previous corporate plan 2005-2008, the 18 priorities were grouped into four sections: social wellbeing; economic wellbeing; environmental wellbeing and improving the way the Council works. Non priorities, such as not extending CCTV cameras beyond the town centres, were identified. The external priorities were ranked high, medium and low but resource allocation did not consistently reflect this ranking. Despite this, good progress was achieved in the four high priorities of improving housing, reducing crime, increasing jobs and speeding up housing benefit payments. Some resources were moved from low priorities to higher priorities. Over the last two years this has involved moving about £250,000 per year away from the Civic Hall and the museum café into higher priority services such as housing and refuse recycling. Additional investment of almost £11 million from external sources was targeted on high priorities such as regeneration, housing and crime reduction over the last three years. However, lower priority services such as recreation and culture also received increased investment. The new corporate plan 2007-2021 does not rank priorities or identify non-priorities. Reducing the priorities from 18 to 12 in the new plan reflects greater focus, but the lack of ranking means there is no explicit direction for when future decisions over budget allocation are made. The priorities are reflected in the medium term financial plan and the Council has identified that it needs to do more work on determining base budgets. It has drafted cross cutting action plans for each of the 12 priorities which, with service plans, provide an integrated matrix of milestones and targets. However these are not sufficiently developed to be used for planning and delivering services. Consequently it is difficult for the Council to plan its resources and then measure its success in delivering its priorities.

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

- 33 In the new corporate plan, the Council has based its priorities on its shared vision and aims. They are clearly linked to the priorities in the LAA and SCP and balance national, regional and local priorities. Extensive consultation with different parts of the community and detailed needs assessments informed the developing of priorities across the borough and in local neighbourhoods. In Bedworth Heath the Council has undertaken a social audit looking at quality of life improvements needed after the colliery closed. As a result, crime prevention schemes, youth outreach work, environmental improvements at the local shops and a pastoral care project at the local school have all been identified and £150,000 of external funding secured to add to Council funding.
- 34 Strategic plans and service plans are variable in their alignment with the corporate plan and in target setting. Some are good and link well to the corporate plan and SCP. The crime and disorder strategy sets out a clear action plan with responsible bodies, inputs, outputs, outcomes, baselines and performance measures. The local plan directly links planning and development decisions to the priorities and translates these into actions such as attending quickly to planning applications which offer regeneration and jobs opportunities. Others are less precise. For example, although the health improvement plan links well to the SCP and outlines partners' responsibilities, it has imprecise targets such as 'raise awareness of emergency hormonal contraception' and 'target more clinical sessions in the area.' The housing services plan has an action to deliver affordable homes but is not precise about how many. This means that the Council cannot ensure that its services are effective in delivering its current priorities.
- 35 Priorities take account of the needs of black and minority ethnic (BME) groups and other groups at risk of disadvantage but actions to deliver services to match these needs are inconsistent. Extensive consultation in the development of the SCP and the corporate plan means that the needs of all communities were included in setting priorities. However it is not clear how this will be achieved. For example, priority four is 'to develop a confident, cohesive and diverse community' but it is unclear how this will be done other than by an intention 'to work on methods to ensure services reach the hard to reach groups.' This means that people in disadvantaged groups may not have their additional needs met.
- 36 There are clear links between community outcomes and Council priorities. Grant funding is provided to voluntary and community organisations following agreed criteria which ensures that projects support the aims within the SCP and the corporate plan. Grants are provided to a range of organisations such as the Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) and Neighbourhood Watch and to groups delivering services to some at risk of disadvantage. For example the Rainbows Sunshine Company received £5,700 to pay for percussion instruments and signing lessons for its weekly drama sessions with adults with learning difficulties and Doorway receives a grant for supporting homeless and unemployed young people.

- 37** The Council is focused on delivering improved services. Following the last corporate performance assessment it requested support from the government through an improvement board. The Council developed a high level improvement plan to ensure focused activity on priority services. When the external improvement board was no longer considered necessary in June 2007, the Council introduced an internal improvement board made up of councillors, staff from all levels in the Council and an independent member from the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) to continue its focus and learning. Consequently improving services has been internalised as a shared responsibility for all parts of the Council.

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 adequately in this area. Members of staff are strongly committed to improving services and good leadership is pointing the way. The roles and relationships of councillors and officers are generally clear and the quality of political and managerial leadership in partnership working has improved. Decision-making is more effective and councillors are increasingly able to focus on their strategic responsibilities, leaving officers to address operational matters. However, arrangements in other key areas such as scrutiny, workforce planning, diversity and working with contractors are less well developed. Although there are plans to improve capacity in most of these areas, limited impact has been made to date.
- 39 Political and managerial leadership at the Council is improving overall and, in places, is strong. Good commitment from staff at all levels and sound leadership from senior managers has led to improved services and the delivery of the Council's priorities. The Council's senior managers and cabinet members contribute well to partnership working, with the Chief Executive, in particular, proving to be a strong and effective advocate for the borough in county and sub-regional settings. This is being added to by the strong approach of the Council's internal improvement panel which is focussing on better matching of resources to priorities, improving partnership working and strengthening corporate working.
- 40 The ability of councillors to lead and contribute to the continuing improvement in services is underdeveloped. Good training and development programmes on the role of the modern member have been introduced. Roles and responsibilities for councillors and officers are now clear, the opposition group is challenging the ruling group more robustly and cabinet members are now more strategic, allowing officers to focus on operational issues. Despite a willingness to take responsibility for their portfolios, cabinet members are not leading preparation and presentation of their own reports to cabinet as officers continue to provide the majority of input. Also, reports to overview and scrutiny panels are presented by officers and questions from scrutiny members are usually put to officers with portfolio holders rarely attending or being questioned at panel meetings. Although the scrutiny function is developing, it lacks the rigour and challenge that is needed to ensure that cabinet is fully held to account. This means that the cabinet and scrutiny structure is not fully effective.

- 41 The Council's approach to ethical standards is sound and improving. The new constitution contains a code of conduct for councillors and a protocol for councillor-officer relations, and councillors have been provided with training on the new ethical framework. This focus on behaviours and standards means that councillors from both groups are increasingly fulfilling the role of the modern member.
- 42 There are good relationships between officers and councillors and between councillors in the ruling and opposition groups. Officers support the cabinet in its decision-making and officers have worked with the opposition group to develop an alternative budget. There is a sound structure of councillor and officer meetings which is supported by a clear scheme of delegation. Councillors and officers make appropriate decisions and key decisions are addressed in an increasingly non-partisan manner including the recent approval of the LAA. Consequently decision-making at the Council is open, timely and focussed on the Council's priorities.
- 43 The Council manages its risks well. It has produced a risk management strategy which sets out the risk identification process, how responsibility is allocated and how risks should be managed in partnership. Risk registers are in place with key operational risks appearing in the Council's service development plans. Sound risk management is helping the Council to focus on its priorities.
- 44 The Council is in a sound financial position to be able to deliver its improvement programme. The Council has adequate arrangements for financial management, has a sufficient level of reserves and has consistently kept within its budget. This means it has not had to raise council tax in the last two years. In addition, the Council's housing revenue account (HRA) is well structured to allow the Council to meet its decent homes targets. Although its capital spending is linked to its priorities, the Council does not always match its day to day spending in this way. The Council does recognise there is further work to do on aligning spending to its priorities.
- 45 The Council's approach to value for money is good. Its overall level of performance is well aligned with its costs but it has some higher levels of spend, particularly in cultural services. A value for money strategy is in place which sets out actions to develop a value for money culture, emphasises the importance of external funding and quantifies the projected efficiency savings which the Council is on track to exceed. However, despite examples in a few service areas, there is no consistent, corporate approach to measuring and improving value for money and service development plans do not adequately set out how this is to be achieved. In the absence of data on the specific value for money position across service areas, the Council will not be able to focus its resources on key areas that need to improve value for money.

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

- 46 The Council's workforce is not being used to its full capacity in delivering services. The human resources strategy commits the Council to develop corporate workforce planning arrangements and flexible working practices but these are at early stages. Good work has been done in addressing difficult to fill posts but this approach has not been spread across the Council. Sickness absence levels have reduced but despite policy and operational improvements overall levels are around ten and a half days per staff with significantly higher levels in front-line service areas. This is higher than the national district council average. Consequently the Council is not making the most efficient use of its staff.
- 47 There is a mixed approach to developing a strategic approach to partnerships, procurement and commissioning. Examples of good activity in this area include the development of a funding strategy to improve the capacity of the voluntary and community sector, improvements to engagement with black and minority ethnic groups, the appointment of a shared procurement officer with a neighbouring authority and examples of bespoke training and development packages for community representatives and activists. However, working with contractors is less well developed with the strategy for improving capacity in this area insufficiently clear. This mixed approach means that, while improvements in capacity in some areas will help the Council achieve its priorities, lack of progress in others may result in achievements being limited.
- 48 The Council's knowledge and skills to address the equalities and diversity agendas is underdeveloped. It has achieved level 2 of the equality standard for local government and it has put in place a range of strategies and plans covering key user groups but these are not sufficiently linked to the delivery of front line services. The Council is rolling out its equalities impact assessment work, but this is yet to be completed. Consequently the Council cannot be sure that its staff are equipped to deliver services to all parts of the community.

Performance management

- 49 The Council is performing adequately in this area. It has improved its overall approach to performance management. Long-term targets are too narrow but the Council has good arrangements for target setting for key performance indicators, collating and monitoring performance information and for dealing with under-performance. However, aspects of its reporting, including integrating equality and diversity issues and reporting against priorities are less well developed and it has not sufficiently linked resources with performance. It has an improving approach to dealing with customer complaints and is developing its arrangements for learning and embedding a performance management culture. The improvements in performance management have contributed to better overall service outcomes for local people, but sustained absolute improvement may not be achieved without further progress in key areas.

- 50 The key targets in the corporate plan for 2021 are too narrow to fully reflect the breadth of the aims although they are broadly appropriate. For example in the environment aim, one priority is to create a greener and cleaner environment and the key target is resident satisfaction with parks and the cleanliness of the area, with no reference to actual measures of 'greener' and 'cleaner'. This means that although the ambitions have wide support, the public is not able to judge fully whether they have been achieved.
- 51 In contrast, the Council's approach to target setting for key performance indicators is good. Targets have to be set by reference to, among other things, current performance, corporate priorities, capacity, a judgment of realistic improvement and benchmarking data. Good target setting in the Council's key service improvement areas - benefits, planning, recycling and housing - over the past three years has helped to secure good and sustained improvement in these areas.
- 52 The Council has good arrangements for collating and monitoring a wide range of performance data. Its TEN database contains best value performance indicators (BVPIs), local performance indicators, risks, actions from service development plans and LAA targets. Most of the Council's service standards are on TEN, and it has plans in place to complete this and to improve monitoring. Data on TEN is easily accessible by managers and councillors with a particular strength being the bespoke assessments of performance under each cabinet portfolio area. These arrangements have meant that the Council is more focused on performance levels.
- 53 The Council has adequate arrangements for reporting performance. A well structured report (the IPMR) is produced which includes progress against performance indicators, budget monitoring information, details of the Gershon efficiencies programme, key risk management issues, progress against its high level improvement plan and details of customer feedback. This is produced quarterly for cabinet with more regular reports produced on key indicators for senior managers. Overview and scrutiny panels (OSPs) receive quarterly reports on BVPIs and six monthly progress reports on actions from service development plans. Assessments of progress being made against Council priorities are not sufficiently addressed in performance management reporting. The Council plans to develop a way to measure how well priorities in the new corporate plan are being delivered, but this was not in place for the previous corporate plan. The production of reports to senior officers and councillors is helping the Council stay on track and focus on priority areas, but this does not show the level of progress in delivering its priorities.
- 54 The Council's limited approach to equalities and diversity in setting priorities and delivering action plans is reflected in a lack of analysis of performance against, for example, geographical areas, black and minority ethnic groups, age or disability. Some services, such as the leisure trust, do gather and analyse data in this way. But the needs of all communities are not systematically taken into account in the design, delivery and evaluation of all services. This means that the Council does not know whether all its services are appropriately meeting the needs of all members of the community.

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

- 55** Performance management of partnerships is underdeveloped. The Council is working with its partners to develop arrangements for reporting against the targets in the sustainable community plan. These arrangements are still at an early stage, but appear to provide a good level of information to the local strategic partnership (LSP), allowing it to monitor trends in performance. The draft LSP performance management framework does not, however, include reference to the process for dealing with poor or under-performance. Monitoring of service level agreements and contracts takes place and is improving by the development of a more consistent approach. As with its own performance, diversity issues are not fully integrated into the monitoring and reporting of partnership, service level agreement (SLA) and contractor performance meaning that the Council cannot make a full assessment of the impact of performance in these areas.
- 56** Processes for addressing poor or under-performance within the Council are good. There is a robust four-stage process with an increasing level of intervention when remedial action is not successful. This process includes regular discussion between portfolio holders and relevant assistant directors, analysis of key areas of poor performance by the corporate performance monitoring group and monitoring of under-performing areas by the relevant OSP. Recent examples of service areas that have improved after going through this process include rent arrears, council house re-let times and car park usage. The impact from monitoring by OSP is limited. In addition, there is a good awareness among managers of the link between the employee review scheme, where targets are set for individuals, and performance data showing under-performance. Where there is an issue with an individual or a team's, performance, appropriate action is taken which includes both support and, where appropriate, the use of the capability process. These robust arrangements have helped the Council in securing good improvements in priority service areas.
- 57** The Council has not sufficiently integrated resource management into its performance management arrangements. Although the IPMR does contain a section on revenue and capital budget monitoring, this is not linked to specific performance issues and there is no indication of the value for money in key service areas. In addition, there is no link made between other resource issues, such as assets, IT and people, to various levels of performance. This means that, with the lack of sufficient data mentioned earlier, the Council is not able to make a full assessment of the reasons for poor or under-performance and is not able to make comparative value for money judgments on its services.

- 58 The approach for dealing with customer complaints and comments is adequate and improving. The Council has a detailed policy which sets out the process for dealing with complaints but does not indicate how overall impact of this process is to be measured. Complaints are monitored and reports to senior managers and councillors set out the proportion that has been resolved. Services have improved following specific complaints include the housing repairs process and the provision of large text documents for people with impaired sight.
- 59 There are reasonable processes in place to allow for corporate learning and the development of a performance management culture. The Council has improved its approach to seeking and learning from external challenge including the recent inclusion on the new improvement board of an IDeA officer. Other examples include reviews of the Council's arrangements by other local authorities and the calling of external witnesses to the OSPs. Benchmarking is being increasingly used, but this is not consistent across all areas and contractors. In addition, the Council is seeking to embed a performance culture by providing performance information to staff, regularly discussing performance at team meetings and an increasing focus on its employee review scheme. However, despite improving the take up of this scheme, the Council does not monitor its impact. The lack of data on the quality and impact of the scheme hinders progress towards a stronger performance culture.

What has been achieved?

Achievement and Improvement

- 60 The Council is performing well in this area. It has focused on delivering improvements in its key priority areas outlined in the previous and new corporate plans and community plans. Effective partnership working, in which the Council usually takes the lead, and judicious use of leverage are improving the quality of life of residents through regeneration, job creation, housing, health improvement programmes, crime reduction and securing funding for a variety of community determined projects. Performance in key service areas such as benefits processing, housing, planning and recycling has improved significantly taking the Council to an overall average profile. Customer satisfaction is very high when the national trend is downward.
- 61 Based on national performance indicators the Council is improving strongly. In 2005/06, 63 per cent of the Council's key performance indicators improved. The latest unaudited comparative data shows a consistent trend of improvement at a faster rate than average for district councils. In 2006/07, 69 per cent of BVPIs improved compared with a national average of 58 per cent. The rate of improvement over the last three years is 74 per cent of comparable BVPIs against a national average of 55 per cent. The Council's absolute performance also compares favourably. In 2006/07, 62 per cent of the Council's BVPIs were better than average but with 24 per cent in the best performing category compared with 32 per cent nationally.
- 62 The Council is at the forefront of partnerships in the borough leading to significant achievements in its priority areas. Partners point to the persistence and focus shown by councillors and senior officers, particularly the Chief Executive, in bringing major projects to fruition. The Council's contribution has been critical in the major regeneration of Camp Hill, a large run down estate of, primarily, former council housing. Total investment of around £150 million has so far seen the completion of 172 new homes (46 designated affordable), phase two has started and includes 230 new homes (25 per cent affordable) and in phase three the plan is to demolish 380 dwellings and build 800 new ones (25 per cent affordable). Where homes are not demolished, physical improvements have been made to those existing homes so that the whole community benefits directly from the programme. Additional developments include a community building with library and youth facilities and environmental improvements such as new cycle ways, park and wildlife areas and outdoor play areas.

- 63** The Council has used its own assets and its planning responsibilities well to generate sustainable developments throughout the borough. The Ropewalk shopping centre in Nuneaton and the Aldi and Tesco developments in Bedworth all included sale of council owned surface car parks to provide additional space. In return, the Council ensured, through planning consents, that the new builds were suited to the two town centre plans; provided modern, safer car parking; secured existing and provided 350 additional jobs; and in Nuneaton ensured that the great majority of shops were new to the area increasing the retail attraction. The Council also invested in market improvements in Nuneaton and Bedworth town centres. As a result, the number of shoppers in Nuneaton has increased by 20 per cent and public satisfaction with markets is 79 per cent.
- 64** Crime is reducing and people feel safer. The latest official figures for 2005/06 show that the incidence of burglaries, car crime, and violent crime all reduced while robberies remained constant. All rates are lower than average for similar areas especially burglaries and thefts from vehicles. Warwickshire surveys show reductions of about 3 per cent in fear of crime over the last two years in the borough. The Council has been active with its partners at neighbourhood level, identifying and implementing anti-crime measures, such as more police officers and police community support officers (PCSOs) in the borough and better reporting of and responding to anti-social behaviour. Targeted work with young people led to a reduction of anti-social behaviour by 58 per cent in Galley Common ward and 26 per cent in Abbey ward in 2006/07.
- 65** The Council works well with its partners to improve the health of residents but PCT capacity has recently restricted development plans. The borough has been designated a 'spearhead' area for health bringing in additional funding. This is due to comparatively low life expectancy rates and high rates of infant mortality, teenage pregnancy, heart disease, smoking related deaths and obesity. The Council contracted the leisure trust to respond with 'walking for health' and sports and drugs programmes. Two sexual health officers have been appointed jointly with the Warwickshire teenage pregnancy partnership to work with young people and reduce early pregnancy. These developments have taken place despite inherited debts in the new PCT swallowing up the first year of 'spearhead' funding of £1.3 million; a decision that the Council strongly opposed.
- 66** The Council's improvements are contributing well to partners' targets. The community plan for 2004-2007 set out eight priority themes with 16 quality of life performance indicators. Of those, 14 are on track to achieve or exceed the target. Some are the Council's direct responsibility, such as waste recycling and the decent homes standard while others are shared. The Council has contributed well to these. For example the provision of town centre wardens and a parking attendant contributes to promoting the town centres and reducing crime. The Council also contributes half to the community plan fund which provides opportunities for local community groups to decide on local improvements. These include victim support, domestic abuse counselling and a new toilet block at Newdigate allotments.

- 67 Satisfaction rates with the Council are very good. Satisfaction with Council services overall has improved over three years from 50 per cent to 65 per cent to be among the best in the country. This is reflected in individual services with improving and high rates of satisfaction with recycling and waste, street cleanliness, museums, theatres and sports facilities. Tenant satisfaction has also improved substantially. This means that residents have recognised that the Council's achievements have improved their quality of life.
- 68 The Council is making good progress at improving access to services for residents. The Council opened the new contact centre in Nuneaton in September 2007. The Council is also making good progress in developing its ICT structures, with the public able to access 100 per cent of the Council's transactions electronically, such as reporting fly tipping. Improvements in the use of ICT and better processes for dealing with enquiries at the Council's contact centre are resulting in better customer service.
- 69 The Council is achieving a key priority of overcoming poverty and disadvantage by processing housing benefit claims more quickly so that it has improved from being one of the worst councils nationally two years ago to be among the best performing councils for new claims and above average for changes of circumstances. Other services are geared to people at disadvantage including helping less well off people to receive over £750,000 in additional benefits in the last two years and securing £88,000 in grants for 38 households in June 2007 to improve home heating.
- 70 Achievements in regeneration and job creation are impressive. Major developments at Bermuda Park industrial and leisure area, Prologis Park industrial area, the Ropewalk shopping centre in Nuneaton and the former Dunns foundry site are all examples. The Council set an ambitious target of every resident being able to access a suitable job opportunity. While this is difficult to measure, 457 jobs were created in the borough in 2006/07, more than anywhere else in Warwickshire and the number of people in work is catching up with the rest of the county. The Council enabled these developments with a culture in planning focused on regeneration and job creation. This resulted in planning performance improving over the last three years from being among the worst performers nationally in the three primary measures to exceeding government targets.

- 71 Vulnerable people on low incomes are supported well by Council strategies and intervention. The Council has a broad-based approach to dealing with the large rise in the housing waiting list. Pro-active work has prevented 77 families from becoming homeless in the first six months of this year by negotiating with existing landlords or using a rent deposit scheme to secure alternative tenancies. The number of families in temporary accommodation is falling and the average length of stay is shorter. The supply of affordable homes is increasing from a low base. The Council has secured funding for 66 affordable new homes in the first six months of this year in partnership with registered social landlords (RSLs) which matches the number of affordable new homes for the whole of each of the previous two years. The number of privately owned vacant dwellings returned to use as a result of council action has increased significantly so that for the last two years it has been above the national average. In partnership with social landlords, there is local hostel or housing provision for disadvantaged people including a bond assistance scheme which has helped 45 people into accommodation since April 2007.
- 72 As a landlord the Council is improving. In an inspection in February 2005 it was judged to be delivering a 'fair' service with 'uncertain' prospects for improvement. Since then, re-let times have improved significantly to be among the best nationally and handling repairs has improved from below to above average. Tenant satisfaction has improved correspondingly from 67 per cent three years ago to 76 per cent in 2006/07, close to the national average. The Council is on course to achieve its target for all Council housing to meet the decent homes standard by 2010.
- 73 The Council focuses its improvement on priority areas. When the culture and leisure service was inspected in April 2007 it was judged to be a fair service with poor prospects. The Council responded by making immediate changes to the leadership of the service, addressed funding levels and recognised the wider contribution the service makes to other priority areas such as the leisure trust working on anti-social behaviour and health improvement. This re-focusing means that the Council is better placed to deliver its priorities.
- 74 Environmental services are adequate and improving. Waste recycling has improved from a poorly performing 10 per cent in 2003/04 to 25 per cent in 2006/07 above the Council's statutory targets but below the national average. All households are now served by kerbside recycling. Public satisfaction with both waste collection and recycling has also improved from below to above average. The Council is one of only 40 councils to be accredited for its outstanding work in energy efficiency, for example by saving £30,000 per year in sheltered housing schemes through energy efficiency work. This means that the Council is contributing to a cleaner, greener environment for its residents.

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 Nuneaton And Bedworth Borough Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 8 November 2007 to 15 November 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.