

Environment - Waste Management, Street Scene and Sustainability

Northampton Borough Council

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Contents

Service Inspection	4
Summary	5
Scoring the service	6
Recommendations	8
Report	10
Context	10
The locality	10
The Council	10
The scope of the inspection	11
National context	11
The Council's approach to the local environment	12
How good is the service?	13
What has the service aimed to achieve?	13
Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users?	14
Is the service delivering value for money?	19
What are the prospects for improvement to the service?	22
What is the service track record in delivering improvement?	22
How well does the service manage performance?	24
Does the service have the capacity to improve?	27
Appendix 1 – Service targets for 2007/08	30

Service Inspection

This inspection has been carried out by the Audit Commission under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999 and is in line with the Audit Commission's strategic regulation principles. These principles embody the objectives of our Strategic Plan and Strategic Regulation. They also reflect the principles from *The Government's Policy on Inspection of Public Services (July 2003)*.

Audit Commission service inspections should:

- focus on public service outcomes from a user perspective;
- act as a catalyst to help inspected bodies improve their performance;
- concentrate inspection work where it will have most impact, so that it is proportionate and based on an assessment of risk;
- be based on a rigorous assessment of costs and benefits, with a concern for achieving value for money both by the inspected organisation and within the inspection regime itself;
- be, and be seen to be, independent of the inspected organisation;
- report in public, using impartial evidence to inform the public about the performance of public services so as to enhance accountability;
- involve collaborative working with other inspectorates and external review agencies to achieve greater coordination and a more holistic approach to the assessment of performance by audited and inspected bodies;
- share learning to create a common understanding of performance that encourages rigorous self assessment and better understanding of their performance by inspected organisations;
- be carried out objectively by skilled and experienced people to high standards and using relevant evidence, transparent criteria, and open review processes; and
- enable continuous learning so that inspections can become increasingly effective and efficient.

We assess services using published key lines of enquiry (KLOE) to inform our judgements. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk.

This report is issued in accordance with the Audit Commission's duty under section 13 of the 1999 Act.

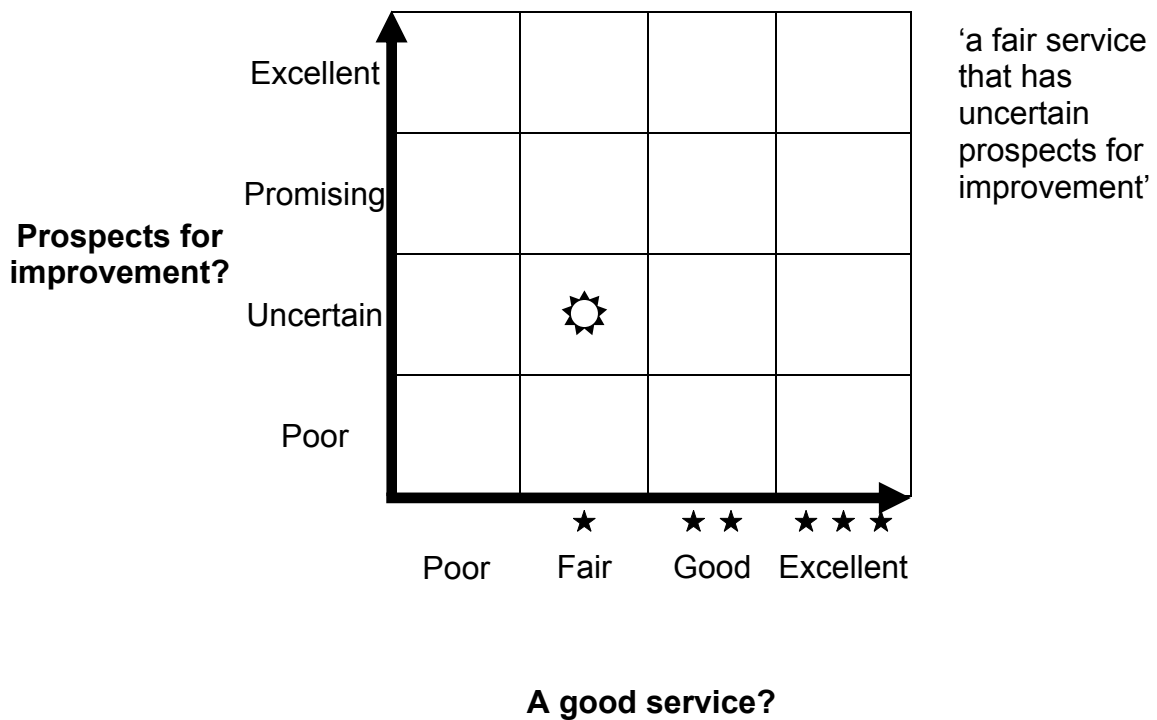
Summary

- 1 The Council provides a satisfactory level of service overall. It has an extensive range of recycling facilities which includes bring sites and kerbside collections for paper, cardboard, cans and plastics. It has introduced a trial kerbside collection of glass. Recycling levels are high and have increased over the last three years. Most of the streets of Northampton are clean and have a low level of litter. However, residents' satisfaction with the waste collection service and street cleanliness is low.
- 2 The Council is working successfully to reduce carbon emissions. The Upton development has won two environmental sustainability awards. The Council has reduced domestic energy consumption through energy efficiency and insulation grants. It is working with the Carbon Trust to reduce its own carbon footprint and has set challenging targets for this.
- 3 However, customer focus is not well developed. The Council does not communicate effectively with all residents about the service. It has not effectively addressed residents' concerns about replacing bins and recycling boxes after collection. It has not systematically assessed the needs of diverse communities and groups to effectively address their needs.
- 4 There is no strategic approach to delivering this service within an overall vision for the Council. The Council is unable to demonstrate that all elements of this service are providing value for money.
- 5 Improvement is not consistent across all elements of this service. Satisfaction with waste collection fell substantially in the national survey of 2006, while satisfaction with street cleaning and recycling improved. The rate of improvement on national performance indicators was below average in 2006/07 compared to other district councils. Its approach is uncoordinated rather than strategic. Plans do not address all residents' concerns or the Council's priorities, and will not directly lead to improvements that residents will notice in the short-term.
- 6 It is uncertain if the Council has the capacity to deliver significant improvement in this service in the short-term. Although there is clear commitment to improve the service, and a new structure is being introduced to achieve this, this is likely to impair the Council's ability to improve in the short-term. The lack of capacity in corporate support services such as legal services and human resources also limits service delivery and improvement.
- 7 Overall, Northampton Borough Council provides fair, one-star, environmental services which have uncertain prospects for improvement.

Scoring the service

- 8 We have assessed Northampton Borough Council as providing a 'fair', one-star service that has uncertain prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Table 1 Scoring chart¹:



Source: Audit Commission

¹ The scoring chart displays performance in two dimensions. The horizontal axis shows how good the service or function is now, on a scale ranging from no stars for a service that is poor (at the left-hand end) to three stars for an excellent service (right-hand end). The vertical axis shows the improvement prospects of the service, also on a four-point scale.

9 The service is a fair, one-star service because:

- performance indicators are generally good;
- waste management is a low cost service; and
- the Upton development has won two sustainable development awards.

However:

- there is a lack of customer focus;
- there is not a systematic, joined up approach to service delivery; and
- the Council is not consistently demonstrating value for money.

10 The service has uncertain prospects for improvement because:

- improvement has not been consistent in all service areas;
- the current Corporate Plan and vision are limited, and it is unclear when the new vision will be in place;
- the Service Plan has significant gaps, does not align fully with the current Corporate Plan and does not address key customer concerns; and
- there is a lack of strategic capacity within the service. Corporate capacity is impacting on service delivery and it is unclear what the impact of the restructure will be.

However:

- it has improved services over the last three years;
- performance management systems are in place; and
- new senior political and manager leadership is driving change.

Recommendations

- 11 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, councils need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the Council. In addition we identify the approximate costs² and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context the inspection team recommends that the Council should do the following.

Recommendation

- R1 Ensure that a strategic approach is taken to service delivery which supports the Council's future vision. The service's place shaping role should be key to this strategic approach, which should include:*
- promoting the Council's vision for the future so that service planning can be closely aligned to planned outcomes;*
 - the timely development and approval of new corporate and service plans aligned to the vision;*
 - joined up service planning based on a corporate vision and customer needs;*
 - a better focus on partnership working including working with the County Council and its waste partners and on the corporate approach to procurement;*
 - routine evaluation of initiatives, which should include defining success measures at the beginning of the project; and*
 - a corporate approach to enforcement which should send a clear message about the Council's commitment to its policies.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- clearer focus for service delivery to meet expected strategic outcomes;
- fewer ad hoc initiatives and better use of resources;
- the needs of all users being consistently met; and
- all of the Council actions positively contributing to its overall aims and objectives.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs.

Detailed plans to implement these recommendations should be in place by December 2008.

² Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 per cent and high cost is over 5 per cent.

Recommendation

R2 Improve the customer focus across these service areas. In particular the Council should:

- *improve communication and engagement so that the public understands the service and can fully participate;*
- *improve its approach to diversity;*
- *deal with complaints and enquiries promptly and courteously at all levels; and*
- *ensure that service standards are based on customer needs, include measurable outcomes against which the service can be judged and are published so that the public can find and understand them.*

The expected **benefits** of this recommendation are:

- consistent and targeted service delivery to meet the needs of all users;
- improved communications with the public; and
- improved satisfaction with the service.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs.

Detailed plans to implement these recommendations should be in place by December 2008.

Recommendation

R3 Demonstrate value for money across all areas of this service. In particular the Council should:

- *review service delivery methods to maximise all resources and improve VFM;*
- *improve the use of data to manage performance;*
- *further develop the corporate approach to value for money to ensure that analysis is both accurate and challenging; and*
- *ensure that there is sufficient capacity in the legal and human resources sections to properly support front line services.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved support to front line services;
- better targeting of service improvement initiatives; and
- improved value for money and use of resources.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs.

Detailed plans to implement these recommendations should be in place by December 2008.

Report

Context

The locality

- 12 Northampton Borough Council is an urban district in the east midlands of England. It covers 81 square kilometres, and has extensive areas of parklands and green space. It has a population of 200,100 according to mid 2006 estimates, and so has a high population density compared to the region at 2,417 people per square km. It has a diverse and growing minority ethnic population, with 12.3 per cent from minority communities. This is above the regional average of 8.75 per cent and close to the national average of 13 per cent, and continues to grow due to immigration. The town has 88,472 households, and this is planned to expand to around 120,000 by 2021 as part of the Milton Keynes and South Midlands Growth area.
- 13 Deprivation in the district is mixed. Overall, the district is ranked 129 out of 354 district and unitary authorities, where 354 is the least deprived. Six areas fall into the 10 per cent most deprived in the country and a further 27 wards are in the 25 per cent of most deprived wards in England.³ Unemployment is lower than the national average with lower than average take-up of benefits by working age people. There is a higher than average working age population, and a lower than average elderly population.

The Council

- 14 The Council is Liberal Democrat controlled, gained from no overall control in the May 2007 election. It has 26 Liberal Democrat, 15 Conservative, 5 Labour and 1 independent councillors. It has a leader and cabinet governance arrangements.
- 15 The Council was rated as 'poor' in its Comprehensive Performance Assessment of 2004. As a result it has been subject to government monitoring. Recent improvements have been recognised and the level of monitoring is reducing.
- 16 The Council appointed a new Chief Executive in November 2007. He chairs an officer management board, which meets weekly. He has introduced a new organisation and management structure in line with the Council's priorities.
- 17 The Council employs 1,500 people. The Council's revenue budget for 2007/08 is £30.6 million, an increase of 2.3 per cent compared to the budget for 2006/07.

³ Index of Multiple Deprivation 2007

The scope of the inspection

- 18 The scope for this inspection includes the following services.
- Waste management, including waste collection, waste minimisation and recycling.
 - Street-scene, including street cleaning, fly-tips, abandoned vehicles and graffiti.
 - Environmental sustainability, including use of natural resources, energy efficiency and climate change.

National context

- 19 The Government has set statutory performance standards for local authorities to encourage more recycling. The standards set for Northampton Borough Council were to recycle or compost 24 per cent of its household waste by 2003/04 and 30 per cent by 2005/06. In May 2006 the Government announced a minimum recycling standard of 20 per cent for all councils by 2007/08. In addition, the Landfill Allowance Trading Scheme (LATS) provides a powerful financial incentive for local authorities to minimise waste sent to landfill. In waste management, Northampton Borough Council has a statutory duty to collect household waste and Northamptonshire County Council has a statutory duty to arrange for the disposal of household waste, and to provide a place for local people to dispose of their own household waste.
- 20 Councils have a duty to keep their land clear of litter. The Environmental Protection Act 1990 (EPA) gives a local authority power to deal with litter based problems affecting its area, including issuing fixed penalty tickets to people who commit an offence by dropping litter. A Code of Practice, issued under the Act, recommends a 'clean as necessary' approach and specific levels of cleanliness for various environments. Under the 1990 Town and Country Planning Act, an authority has the power to issue a notice to a private landowner to clean up their land and to undertake the cleaning itself if the landowner fails to act. The Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005 have strengthened the legal powers available to councils to keep their area clean and to tackle other nuisances, such as abandoned vehicles.
- 21 The Government's liveability agenda draws clear links between the quality of the local environment, health issues and crime and disorder. Legislation has been strengthened to help local councils improve the local environment such as increasing the amount for fixed penalty notices for people dropping litter, reducing times taken to remove abandoned vehicles and additional powers to tackle graffiti. In response to the Kyoto protocol, the Government set targets to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 20 per cent, from the 1990 baseline, by 2010.

22 Councils are expected to support the UK sustainable development strategy, Securing the Future, 2005. Councils such as Northampton are expected to use their powers in planning, housing and waste collection, as well as their general wellbeing powers and community leadership, to achieve sustainable development. This includes:

- working with others to promote energy conservation and efficiency;
- protecting wildlife habits and promote biodiversity;
- reducing and mitigating climate change; and
- promoting more sustainable patterns of development.

The Council's approach to the local environment

- 23 The Council has a statutory responsibility to collect household waste, meet minimum standards with respect to recycling and to keep the district clean.
- 24 The budget for 2007/08 for waste collection is £2.35 million, and for recycling it is £3.29 million, with income from recycling of £1.72 million. The Council spent £2.13 million on keeping the streets clear, collecting litter, removing fly-tipped waste and general cleaning in the environment. Grounds Maintenance and Tree Maintenance costs £3.32 million.
- 25 The service employs around 300 staff and provides domestic refuse collection, recycling, street cleansing, graffiti and fly-tip removal, grounds maintenance and abandoned vehicle removal. The Council introduced its current recycling scheme in 2004 by giving all homes two plastic boxes for recycling: a green one for paper and cardboard and a blue one for plastic bottles, cans and foil. In addition, 60,000 properties have been provided with two 240 litre wheelie bins, brown for garden waste and black for non-recyclable waste. These are collected on alternate weeks. The Council operates its own Materials Reclamation Facility (MRF) which processes all recyclable materials collected from the borough, plus some materials from South Northamptonshire District Council. Non-recyclable waste is landfilled at a private site under contract to the County Council.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 26 The Council has been working to its Corporate Plan for 2007-2011. The plan was built on the Community Vision for Northampton, agreed by the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) in January 2007. This includes the aim of making Northampton a cleaner town by 2011.

All of Northampton will be clean and litter free. We will work together to build a community culture of no tolerance of those who litter and pollute our streets.

- 27 This is recognised in the Council's corporate objective 'to ensure that our communities are safer, greener and cleaner'. The corporate priorities for 2007/08 to meet this objective are:

To improve the quality of the environment in which we live.

To help people feel safer through reducing crime and anti-social behaviour.

- 28 However, the actions outlined in this plan are limited in focus and not linked to SMART⁴ targets. In particular, for the services under review, the Corporate Plan gave very little focus for 2007/08. This has been recognised within the Council and there is a new improved Corporate Plan in place for 2008 with further work underway to more clearly set out the Council's future vision.
- 29 The Council has a range of strategies and plans in place that together help promote sustainable planning and practices across the Council. These include the Northampton Energy Strategy 2003, the NBC Leisure Services Environmental Policy 2006, Sustainable Purchasing Policy 2004, and the Sustainable Development Strategy 2007-2011. The Council also signed the Nottingham Declaration in September 2006.
- 30 The Council has not set ambitious targets for this service. Street cleansing targets for 2007/08 were set for poorer performance than in the previous year. This was in response to proposed budget cuts. These targets would have resulted in a noticeable reduction in service. Waste management targets included some modest improvements but did not anticipate any impact on waste minimisation. Key targets for 2007/08 are shown in the table at Appendix 1.

⁴ Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Timebound

14 Environment - Waste Management, Street Scene and Sustainability | How good is the service?

- 31 The Council's corporate plan for 2008-2011 has a priority of helping Northampton's communities become safer, greener and cleaner, which echoes the priority in the previous year's plan. However, the actions are now clearer. These include:
- improving recycling and composting rates to 40 per cent by March 2009;
 - reducing the Council's carbon footprint by 8.1 per cent;
 - provide a reliable and cost effective refuse collection service which promotes waste minimisation;
 - targeting problem areas by supporting neighbourhood clean up operations; and
 - maintaining a clean environment throughout the town by tackling fly-pasting, graffiti and abandoned vehicles.
- 32 Last year the Council recognised that there were issues with the direct service organisation (DSO) at its depot in Westbridge. It commissioned the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) and Price Waterhouse Coopers (PwC) to undertake a high level overview of the services provided in Street Scene and Property Maintenance and the manner in which these were organised. The resulting report found that change was required at every level. Much of the criticism focussed on the property maintenance service which is not part of this inspection. The Council is addressing these issues.

Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users?

- 33 The Council is generally providing a satisfactory level of service for the majority of the people in the borough. However, it does not have a systematic, joined up approach to service delivery. This is leaving some people disadvantaged and public satisfaction with the service is low.

Access and diversity

- 34 The Council is providing good access to recycling facilities across the Borough. The Council provides a recycling collection service to all residents through the green and blue box scheme. It also has 31 bring sites, or recycling banks, which offer residents the opportunity to recycle glass, plastics, cans, textiles, shoes and books, although most sites only offer one or two of these options. This has led to a good level of public participation in recycling.
- 35 This service has responded positively to some identified customer requirements. Plastics recycling was introduced following public concern about the lack of this facility. Kerbside glass recycling is now being introduced due to public demand. Some recycling bring sites are not permanent, but are in place one week in every two or three. This is in response to residents not wanting a permanent installation in case it caused littering and general untidiness.

- 36 The Council has improved the access to the recycling service for previously excluded residents. Recycling opportunities were limited for flat dwellers in Spring Boroughs. The Council has listened to residents requests and has provided communal recycling facilities within the estate. The success of this has prompted the Council to consider similar systems elsewhere. Through close working with the Countywide Travellers' Unit, refuse sacks are provided to illegal encampments for collection, which reduces littering. This demonstrates both a good approach to diversity and a pragmatic approach to service delivery.
- 37 However, there is no comprehensive, strategic approach to developing the service based on customer needs. There has not been a coordinated approach to consultation to establish wider community needs. As a result, the service is not developing in a way which will not consistently meet the needs of all users.
- 38 Communication about the service is not user focussed and does not demonstrate awareness of diversity among local people. The Council has not effectively communicated the assisted bin collection service for older and less physically able residents. Neither have the reasons for some homes having wheeled bins while others have black bags. The Council has sent long, confusing and complex letters out to 1,000 households about refuse and side waste, whether or not it was justified. It has not effectively communicated that nets are available at a small cost to cover recycling boxes, and so littering remains a problem.
- 39 The service's approach to diversity is limited and reactive. It has not carried out detailed equalities impact assessments. The initial screening of the services did not identify any impact on any groups and individuals, including the elderly and people with disabilities. The Council provides literature on request about its services in a number of different languages and it advertises a contact number for translation services. This is not available through the website, where information is only in English. The Council achieved level 2 of Equality Standard in March 2008, later than most councils. The Council is now aiming to develop policy and eligibility criteria for assisted collections to ensure consistency of approach in accordance with its Equalities Scheme. The past approach has led to residents being unaware of service enhancements which could make their lives easier.
- 40 Service standards are in place; however these were not initially based on customer consultation. As a result, the service commenced consultation on new service standards in January 2008, with the aim of proposing a revised set of service standards, based on customer consultation, for implementation in April 2008. At the time of inspection the service standards had not been published.

16 Environment - Waste Management, Street Scene and Sustainability | How good is the service?

- 41 Access to information on this service is adequate. The ability to report problems has recently been added to the Council's website. This allows a range of issues including graffiti, abandoned cars, fly-tipping and problem trees to be reported online, and complements the existing options of telephone and personal visits. The customer contact centre, along with the Council's one-stop shop, offers a joined up service of telephone, face-to-face and internet access. However, some website pages are not being kept up to date. For example the calendar showing where the recycling banks will be on given weeks was still showing 2007 dates when checked in March 2008.
- 42 The Council does not respond to or deal with complaints well. An analysis of complaints data shows that more than half of complaints have not been dealt with within the Council's own timescales. There is also a recurring pattern of not contacting customers or responding to letters, phone calls and emails. However, it has learned from past complaints, for example in making changes to the Christmas-period collections, and the Council's records do show that the number of complaints about waste collection is falling.

Street scene

- 43 The Council is successfully keeping most of the streets of Northampton clean. Most streets have a low level of litter. National performance indicators show that Northampton's streets are among the cleanest in England. However, the major roads circling and leading in to the town do have noticeable levels of litter on the verges and central reservations. Although most of these roads are the responsibility of the County Council, Northampton carries out cleaning on these roads under a service level agreement with the County. The condition of these major roads may explain why only 53 per cent of the local population are satisfied with street cleanliness, which is among the lowest satisfaction levels in the country.
- 44 The Council is also successfully removing fly tipped waste within two days of notification. In 2006/07, 99.6 per cent of flytips were removed within two days of notification. Although this performance was not maintained at the start of 2007/08, due to a budget reduction, an improved approach has enabled the Council to return to its previous performance levels from September 2007.
- 45 Performance is mixed in other aspects of the street scene service. The self-assessed performance for levels of graffiti is poor, although residents do not see graffiti as a major problem. In public areas the Council has taken action to prevent graffiti. For example, the Foot Meadow area of Northampton had suffered from persistent graffiti; in 2006 the Council applied an anti-graffiti coating to the walls and has since monitored and maintained this area to successfully preserve this attractive riverside walkway. Performance in dealing with abandoned vehicles has been fluctuating and is below the Council's own target of 85 per cent for 2007/08. Monthly performance has fluctuated between a low of 61.9 per cent in May and 93.1 per cent in July. By January 2008, only 78.5 per cent had been removed within the 24 hour target. Over the last 12 months the public have not been receiving a consistent high level of service.

- 46 The Council actively involves and supports local communities in improving their local environment. Fifteen Community Clean-ups have been carried out using Council equipment since April 2007. The Council liaises with community groups to encourage local litter picking days. It provides risk assessments and advice, loans out all the necessary equipment and takes away the rubbish collected. Some communities have taken this further by purchasing their own equipment, with Council help, and now organise their own regular monthly clean-ups. The Community Clean-up scheme has removed large quantities of waste and encouraged community pride.
- 47 The Council is not successfully using enforcement to improve the overall street scene. Between April 2007 and February 2008, 75 fixed penalty notices were issued for littering, of which 50 have been paid. During the same period 105 fixed penalty notices were issued in relation to household waste presented as side waste rather than being properly placed in the correct bin. Only 20 of the 105 fixed penalty notices had been paid at the time of this inspection, although the council is pursuing cases through court action. Failure to chase payment can give the impression that the Council is not serious about this issue and this will do little to combat the problem.

Waste management

- 48 The Council has successfully introduced a comprehensive recycling scheme. Combined recycling and composting performance is among the best in the country, as illustrated in the following table.

Table 2 Recycling and Composting performance in 2006/07

Northampton's combined recycling and composting performance is among the best in the country.

	Northampton	Median	Best Quartile
Percentage of waste collected that is either recycled or composted	37.22	29.86	36.96
Percentage of waste collected that is recycled	20.41	19.98	24.19
Percentage of waste collected that is composted	16.81	11.20	17.97

Source: National Performance Indicators

18 Environment - Waste Management, Street Scene and Sustainability | How good is the service?

- 49 The Council is helping to reduce the amount of waste sent for landfill, even though overall waste levels collected have increased faster than the national trend. In 2004/05 the Council sent 272.43 kg of waste to landfill per head of population. In 2005/06 this reduced to 256.61 kg. There was a slight increase in 2006/07, to 259.16 kg, but projections for 2007/08 show this reducing to 246 kg. The amount of waste sent to landfill has reduced by 3.5 per cent in 2007/08 compared with 2006/07.
- 50 While this is primarily due to increased recycling and composting rates, the Council is also taking specific actions around education and support for schemes such as the real nappy campaign and the mailing preference service. The Northamptonshire Waste Partnership jointly funds a Waste Education Officer and the Waste Education Bus, which promotes waste hierarchy principles across the county. The Education Bus visited 19 schools within the Borough during 2006/07, engaging with 2,295 pupils. Northampton also uses the Education Bus for its regular recycling road shows. There is also a waste education centre at the Council depot, which is used for school and community groups. The Council employs neighbourhood wardens to engage with local communities. One of their roles is to work within schools to encourage respect for the environment and the local community. Schools have reported reductions in litter, graffiti, vandalism, and general antisocial behaviour, following visits from the Neighbourhood Wardens.
- 51 However, the Council's initiatives suffer from a lack of coordination. The blanket approach to enforcement rather than a coordinated and pro-active approach to education and engagement risks alienating the public. Poor communication means that residents do not always understand why the Council acts as it does. The Council does not regularly and systematically tie educational information on waste and recycling together with praise for the wider public for their good performance in reducing the amount of waste going to landfill. There is also no routine evaluation of the success of these initiatives. As a result, learning about what does and doesn't work is not being shared within the service or throughout the Council. For example, the Council's recycling scheme has led to increased litter. The Council collects paper and plastic bottles in open boxes. As a result, these can be blown about on windy days leaving streets looking very untidy. This is a major concern of residents, revealed in complaints and consultation. The Council supplies nets for the boxes to try to solve this problem, but they have not been well publicised. Following a recent successful pilot, the timing of street cleansing rounds is being changed so that they follow the refuse and recycling collection routes, but this will not happen borough wide until the round restructuring exercise is completed later this year.
- 52 There is low public satisfaction with waste collection. The national survey carried out in 2006/07 found that 69 per cent of the people of Northampton were either very or fairly satisfied with their waste collection service. Three quarters of councils in England have satisfaction levels at or above 74 per cent. Satisfaction with recycling services is the same as the national average. The Council has not undertaken any quality research into the reasons for this mismatch of performance and satisfaction.

Sustainability

- 53 The Council has set ambitious targets to reduce its carbon emissions. The Council has a target to be carbon neutral by 2020. The draft Carbon Management Programme Strategy and Implementation Plan produced with the Carbon Trust commits the Council to reducing its carbon dioxide emissions (CO₂) by 35 per cent by 2012 and sets out how this will be achieved. Some of the actions are already underway and the document clearly shows how current and planned actions will reduce carbon emissions. The target for 2008/09 of reducing the carbon footprint by 8.1 per cent appears in the current Corporate Plan. Actions taken to date, including passive infrared light sensors in administrative offices, liquid pool covers on swimming pools and a building energy management system, have delivered an estimated 2 per cent reduction in CO₂ against the 2005/06 baseline.
- 54 The Council is making local housing more sustainable. Upton Grange has won the Royal Town Planning Institute's award for sustainable communities and has been awarded the Building for Life silver standard. A framework plan for the area was prepared in partnership with English Partnerships and the Prince's Foundation, following a series of intensive 'Enquiry by Design' workshops. This was the first practical use of a Design Code in Britain. The Design Code was published in May 2003 as Supplementary Planning Guidance and promotes the use of quality materials and encourages the continuous improvement of energy and water efficient design. One of the innovative features of the development was a sustainable urban drainage system to deal with surface water run-off. This is allowed to run through the site using ditches providing an attractive and ecological green space. An update of the Design Code has incorporated lessons learnt. This is now being used as the basis for other schemes and for supplementary planning documents and guidance.
- 55 The Council is helping to reduce domestic energy consumption within the borough. In excess of £600,000 was spent on grants and works carried out under the Home Energy Conservation Act in 2006/07. This funded home insulation and heating improvements. It has been working to a target of reducing domestic energy consumption by 30.71 per cent between 1996 and 2011. A 27.82 per cent reduction had been achieved by 2007 and the Council is awaiting confirmation that its target has now been exceeded. The Council has exceeded its own target for energy efficiency of its housing stock. In 2003 it had a target of achieving a SAP rating (Standard Assessment Procedure, a measure of energy efficiency of homes) of 60 by 2011. This was exceeded by 2005 and is now 68, which is the national average. Research for the East Midlands Regional Assembly reported in 2006 that the average energy consumption per dwelling in Northampton was 12 per cent lower than the regional average.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 56 Overall, this is a value for money (VFM) service. Waste collection costs are relatively low while street cleansing costs are relatively high. Recycling levels are high and the streets are generally clean. However, the Council's mechanisms for measuring value for money, while improving, are still not robust.

20 Environment - Waste Management, Street Scene and Sustainability | How good is the service?

- 57 The waste collection and recycling elements of this service provide good value for money. Costs are relatively low. In 2006/07 the cost of waste collection per household was £43.10. The average cost for single tier and district councils to provide this service is £48.80 and 25 per cent of councils provide the service for less than £42.08. The combined level of recycling and composting is among the best in the country. Costs have been decreasing since 2004 while the percentage of waste being diverted from landfill has been increasing.
- 58 While the Council's Materials Reclamation Facility (MRF) is generating income from the sale of recyclable materials, it is unclear whether it provides value for money. For 2006/07 this income exceeded £700,000. This is in addition to recycling credits. This more than covers the operating costs of the MRF. Prices for recyclates are regularly monitored and the sorting operations adjusted to ensure that good value for money is being achieved. However, the Council has not recently reviewed whether the difference between the income received for sorted recyclates and the potential income from unsorted recyclates justifies the cost of the MRF. As a result, the council may not be maximising resources or VFM.
- 59 Street cleaning is a high cost service which is generally delivering good performance. The costs per head of population for the street cleaning are among the highest in the country. More than 75 per cent of councils are spending less on this element of the service. However, this is generally delivering clean streets.
- 60 The Council does not consistently make best use of its available resources. It classes side waste presented alongside wheeled bins as fly tipping. This is not removed as part of the refuse collection service, but by the fly tipping team the following day. Common practice in other councils is to either remove it at once and place a warning sticker the bin, or place a sticker on the bin and put the side waste in the empty wheelie bin. Northampton's approach is not an effective use of resources or good VFM.
- 61 The Council does not robustly compare performance against cost across a range of indicators. Recent assessments of value for money undertaken by the Council have not been robust and do not give an accurate and challenging appraisal of VFM. The Council's assessments have combined together performance against individual indicators to give an overly positive picture. For example, the Council's analysis of street cleansing performance shows it as high cost and high performance. While littering does have good performance, the Council's measure for graffiti is poor and fly posting is below average. By failing to differentiate between different elements of the service the Council is not learning from what it does well and is not using the process to focus on those areas in need of improvement.

- 62 The Council does not consistently pursue value for money. The Council operates its vehicle fleet through tendered contract hire arrangements with two providers. This contract is due for renewal in 2008. Although a review has been undertaken, with a view to letting new contracts, it did not consider all available procurement routes and the Council has recognised that further efficiencies can be gained. A further review is now underway. While the Council expects this to produce a better result for the future, these issues should have been considered in the original review. As a result the existing contracts have had to be extended.
- 63 The Council is successfully using partnership for procurement although this is not embedded. The End of Life Vehicle Impound Scheme (ELVIS) is a countywide partnership dealing with abandoned vehicles. The Council is achieving financial savings and improved service delivery through this scheme. The Council has also worked in partnership with other local councils to buy bins to implement their recycling scheme. Although the Council has a new draft procurement strategy it is limited in scope. While it addresses current issues such as the Comprehensive Spending Review, and shows the links with corporate objectives, it has little on partnering and partnership working.
- 64 The Council is not measuring the value for money given by home energy conservation grants. There are anecdotal improvements but no system to measure whether the grants reduce the actual amount of energy used. Better analysis would allow more targeted initiatives.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 65 The Council's track record in delivering improvement is adequate overall. It has improved performance in most service areas, but this has not been consistent across all areas.
- 66 The Council has improved its recycling and composting rate over the last three years, with a 1 per cent incremental increase in 2006/07. Its overall performance has remained in the top 25 per cent of similar councils over this period. Although the amount of waste to landfill increased slightly in 2006/07, recent Council performance data shows it has succeeded in reducing this by 3.5 per cent in 2007/08. This is in line with local and national priorities.
- 67 It has also improved its performance in littering over three years. Although the percentage of land littered to a significant or heavy extent increased slightly in 2006/07, the Council's performance remained in the top 25 per cent of similar councils. It has also promoted and supported community clean ups across the borough. This helps to improve the image of the town and local environments in line with the Council's overall aims and objectives.
- 68 The Council has successfully introduced a kerbside glass collection trial in four wards, including one of the most deprived wards in the borough. It is collecting 4.5 tonnes of glass per week. This is improving service in line with local people's wishes and increasing its levels of recycling by removing the glass from the residual waste that is sent to landfill. It has also set up the trial to identify issues and problems before rolling out the scheme across the Borough.
- 69 The Council has significantly improved the service to allotment holders. It has engaged effectively with the allotment holder association, and involved it in the development of an allotment strategy. This introduced a new set of regulations and guidelines to ensure a fair and consistent approach to allotments and allotment holders. This has reduced the number of complaints from allotment holders. It has also significantly increased the take up of allotments and generated additional revenue income.
- 70 However, improvement is not consistent in all areas. The Council has not effectively addressed known issues such as replacing bins and recycling boxes at the kerbside and preventing or clearing up litter after waste collection. This is a major source of complaints from residents. The Council is planning to follow collections with street cleaning to address this, although this does not prevent littering and may not be the best use of resources or demonstrate good VFM.

- 71 Performance has worsened in some respects. The amount of household waste collected per head has been increasing year on year. This has taken the Council from among the best in the country in 2004/05 to below average in 2006/07 for this performance measure. Recent unaudited Council data indicates that this performance has improved. The percentage of relevant land and highways from which unacceptable levels of graffiti are visible has also increased and is in the bottom 25 per cent of similar councils. The percentage of land from which unacceptable levels of fly-posting are visible remained the same, and performance is below average.
- 72 The Council's overall rate of improvement on environmental performance indicators (PIs) is not consistent compared to similar councils. The Council improved well over last three years, with 60 per cent of PIs improved. This is above the average range for all district authorities (50.2 to 53.8 per cent.) However, its rate of improvement was below average in 2006/07, with 50 per cent PIs improved, compared to the average range for all district authorities of 59.8 to 64.2 per cent.
- 73 Public satisfaction with the service is mixed and is not improving consistently. The national service user survey showed that from 2003/04 to 2006/07:
- satisfaction with parks and open spaces remained high and is in the top 25 per cent of all councils;
 - satisfaction with recycling improved significantly and is above average;
 - the level of satisfaction with the cleanliness of public space also improved, but is very low and remained in the worst 25 per cent; and
 - satisfaction with waste collection fell substantially and remained in the worst 25 per cent.
- 74 The Council has made some improvement to value for money (VFM). It has reduced the cost of waste collection per household, and this is better than average. It has also introduced 'group task and finish' for refuse collections. Refuse collection crews now help out on those rounds that have not been completed when they have completed their own round. This ensures collections are carried out on the usual collection day, and missed collections are picked up. However, it does not have a robust mechanism for measuring value for money and ensuring it is delivered across the service.
- 75 The Council has introduced service efficiencies in street cleansing and re-evaluated rounds to ensure the service provided did not reduce following budget reductions. It has also improved its use of resources to address fly tipping. Neighbourhood wardens are now equipped to pick up fly tips so they can be removed quickly, which is delivering improved performance. This also improves the use of these resources and improves VFM.
- 76 The Council has extended the scope and time scale of a vehicle procurement review as senior finance managers believe that improved VFM can be achieved. It has extended current draw down contracts by one year to enable it to carry out a comprehensive review of options for vehicle procurement.

24 Environment - Waste Management, Street Scene and Sustainability | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 77 It has signed up to the county council agency agreement for agency staff to improve VFM. This is very recent and transitional arrangements are still in place and so it is too early to demonstrate any significant impact.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 78 Service planning is developing but is not fully effective in outlining a strategic vision with challenging outcome and customer focussed targets to improve service delivery. The Council has introduced a new performance management system to improve performance.
- 79 The Council has a new improved Corporate Plan 2008-2011 which it has specifically focused on 2008/09. This highlights helping its communities to become cleaner greener safer as its first priority, and outlines clear areas of focus for the service linked to this priority. These are underpinned by a range of short-term priorities, and milestones and measures to achieve by March 2009. At the time of inspection, the only targets relating to specifically streetscene and waste management which were quantified were to improve recycling and composting to 40 per cent. The Council has now updated the plan and added targets. This enables the Council and residents to assess the rate and scale of improvement in line with its priorities.
- 80 The Council is developing 'Fresh Thinking', a challenging and ambitious vision for the future of Northampton. This is a comprehensive and integrated framework to enable the town to seize opportunities and address the challenges it faces. It recognises that environmental services have an integral and vital role to play in achieving this vision. As it is a consultation document to engage the community, it does not contain specific action plans. The Council intends that following consultation this will be developed as its new Corporate Plan to coordinate plans and resources in line with priorities across the Council.
- 81 The Council has a detailed plan to reduce its carbon footprint. It is working with the Carbon Trust so that it is carbon neutral by 2020. Its plan includes targets, opportunities for the future, what each proposed action will cost, as well as savings per year of both money and CO₂. It also identifies funding and funding opportunities. The Corporate Plan 2008-2011 includes a target to achieve an 8.1 per cent reduction in the Council's carbon footprint.
- 82 Service planning is adequate overall. The Street Scene and Waste Management Service Plan 2008/09 is generally adequate. It outlines the links to key strategic outcomes outlined in the Community Strategy and Corporate Plan. It also integrates the Service Improvement Plan, which has been developed as part of a performance improvement programme. The Service Plan has targets based on national PIs, and two local targets, the number of refuse collections missed per month and the percentage of missed collections put right within 24 hours. All these targets aim for continuous improvement over two years.

- 83 However, the Service Plan also has significant gaps. It does not make the link to the Council's economic development and growth aim of 'making the town more attractive to shoppers, investors, visitors and new residents.' Some corporate plan targets are not reflected. For example, it has no targets on reducing the service's carbon footprint, improving air quality and supporting neighbourhood clean ups. It has no targets on education. The target for improving VFM is limited to reducing the cost of waste collection, which is already low, and does not address all the services. It does not address key customer issues such as replacing bins and boxes. There are currently no firm plans for the roll out of kerbside glass collection to the whole borough, even though it is acknowledged that this will be extended across the Borough to meet a combined recycling and composting rate target of 40 per cent by March 2009. The plan is likely to lead to limited improvement but it is not clear how the Council's wider objectives and specific residents' concerns will be addressed.
- 84 The Service Improvement Plan is detailed and addresses a wide range of basics and fundamentals. Examples include 'improve access to the assisted collection service' and 'improve the cleanliness of the town centre in partnership with local businesses' and 'use management information to improve service performance and planning'. However, many of the actions are to develop, evaluate or review issues, and the plan has few SMART outcomes. It is not clear what service improvements and improved outcomes it will lead to, and how services will improve in the short to medium term.
- 85 The Council and its partners have agreed improved arrangements for dealing with abandoned vehicles from April 2008. New contractual arrangements are in place with eight possible service providers, with clear targets, timescales and accountabilities for action. In addition, the service will be provided at no direct cost to the Council. This improves the service and improves value for money.
- 86 The Council has detailed plans for new refuse collection and street cleaning routes which will be introduced by June 2008. It has used Routesmart software to identify these new routes. This helps to maximise route efficiencies to reduce travel time and fuel costs and avoid high congestion areas at peak times. Routesmart is also used by the other members of Northamptonshire Waste Partnership and enables routes to be combined across council boundaries, which improves efficiencies and environmental impacts.

26 Environment - Waste Management, Street Scene and Sustainability | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 87 A culture of customer-focussed continuous improvement is not fully embedded and the overall approach is not strategic and systematic. For example, it has improved access to services to some extent by increasing the number of services available on the internet or through the one stop shop, but these are not clear or easy to find on the website. The site does not make it clear either in the 'what's new pages' or on the environment home page that these new links are available. They are also difficult to find deep within the site - for example a search for the form for bulky waste collection took six clicks to find. A slightly shorter route is available through the A-Z of services, but this is not signposted and depends on using the correct terminology. No information came up from a search on how to dispose of an old fridge. This indicates a lack of customer focus and strategic thinking and planning to maximise resources and improve service delivery from a customer point of view.
- 88 The service does not consistently challenge or carry out effective analysis of situations to drive improvement. For example, the Council has recently changed its methodology for counting missed bins. Previously it included all the bins in a street where one bin was missed. It now counts only the individual bins which are not subsequently collected on the normal day of collection. An internal performance management report attributes the reduction in recorded missed bins to 'better and more reactive response to alleged missed collections' even though the main reason for the reduction is a change in the way the number of missed collections is recorded. This does not enable the Council to readily identify why bins are missed to prevent reoccurrence and so deliver a right first time service everywhere and reduce additional vehicle travel and costs as they return to collect the missed refuse.
- 89 The service's understanding of diversity and equalities is limited. It has carried out initial Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) screenings for waste management and street scene, but these state that there are no impacts on any of the categories, including age and disability. However, bring sites for glass are generally not accessible to people with mobility difficulties, and the Service Improvement Plan outlines areas such as assisted collections where the service needs to be improved. This shows that the Council is not effectively assessing and addressing specific needs within its EIAs.
- 90 The service does not have a systematic, strategic approach to learning to improve service delivery. For example it has only recently introduced a trial for street cleaners to follow refuse collections to reduce litter. This does not fundamentally address the root cause of the problem to prevent litter happening in the first place. It is now considering providing free nets for the recycling boxes to reduce litter. It does not have an integrated approach to service delivery so that for example street cleaners or refuse crews report graffiti. Without a systematic approach, including learning from best practice, the Council cannot maximise resources and improve services.

- 91 The Council has improved its corporate performance management system and has introduced a systematic approach which is comprehensive and detailed. The framework outlines links from the community strategy through to individual targets. It outlines how and when performance will be reviewed. This includes challenge through monthly Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny reports, monthly meetings of the portfolio holder and director with senior councillors and the chief executive, and performance clinics focussing on priority areas. This has improved reporting and focus, particularly on underperforming areas. However, as previously noted, this process does not always provide a fully accurate picture.
- 92 Risk management is not well developed in the service. Most of the risks in the risk register are generic and specific risks are not clearly identified. Risks relating to opportunities are not identified to create a positive risk culture. The risk register does not consistently identify mitigating actions. For example, the risk register identifies that 'diseased horse chestnut trees present risk to public safety and additional budget pressures due to removal costs'. It does not identify actions or timescales to ensure these risks are mitigated. Without an effective approach to risk management the Council cannot effectively manage and improve the service.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 93 Capacity to deliver significant improvement in the short-term is mixed. The new Chief Executive is driving change and improvement. Senior councillors and staff are committed to improving the service. The service is developing skills of staff and councillors. A new structure is being introduced which is likely to impact negatively on the rate of change in the short-term. Corporate capacity impacts on service delivery and improvement.
- 94 The Council is clearly committed to improving street scene and waste management services. The new Chief Executive is driving change. He is introducing a new senior management structure at both director and head of service level to deliver better public service. This includes a new Director of Environment and Culture, to give a strategic focus on environmental sustainability, quality of life issues, and neighbourhood and area working.
- 95 Senior councillors are also committed to improving the service and recognise the importance of a clean environment to achieve their objectives. They have approved resources to retain graffiti and park rangers teams. The Portfolio Holders for Environment and Performance are working with the senior managers of the service on an East Midlands Improvement Partnership development programme 'Real Time, Real Improvement' to facilitate improvement. One key output from this is the Service Improvement Plan.
- 96 The service is also committed to developing the skills of its staff. It has appointed chargehands to improve team management. These meet regularly so that issues can be raised and discussed. This has improved communication. Over the past two years almost 100 front line employees have successfully completed literacy, numeracy and job specific NVQ training. This includes leadership and waste management NVQs. Front line staff also demonstrate clear willingness to improve the service. This gives a good basis to move forward.

28 Environment - Waste Management, Street Scene and Sustainability | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 97 The Council has enhanced financial management and capacity. The new Director of Finance has appointed new staff who work closely with service heads. They have reviewed budgets and adjusted these to ensure they give an accurate base line to carry out base budget reviews. Accountants are working on the vehicle procurement review team. The scope of this has been extended to ensure maximum VFM is achieved. New controls and reporting systems are in place. This has improved financial planning and management.
- 98 The Council has introduced a more proactive and systematic approach to identifying external funding. One of the corporate finance team reviews funding sources weekly. The management board agree bids that go forward but only if they link to priorities. This is a recent development so it is too early to have had any significant impact on these services.
- 99 The Council is committed to partnership working through the Northamptonshire Waste Partnership. It has approved the Northamptonshire Joint Municipal Waste Management Strategy. This includes extending recycling by collecting kitchen waste from 2009. Costs for this have been built into the Council's 2009/10 budget.
- 100 However the Council does not always ensure that its stated ambitions are properly reflected in its plans. The limitations of current service plans have already been noted. The draft Sustainable Development Plan does not commit the council to any specific outcomes. It has been in draft for 12 months but has not been approved and adopted by the Council. It has been used as a foundation for the Carbon Management Programme Strategy and Implementation Plan, but this plan has not yet been adopted either. Until plans are approved the Council's full commitment to sustainability is not demonstrated, and it cannot be sure that objectives are integrated into operational plans.
- 101 Corporate capacity has a negative impact on service delivery and improvement. Limited capacity within the legal services results in delays for example to following up enforcement notices and prosecutions. Lack of capacity in Human Resources means that areas such as high sickness absence are not addressed as effectively as they could be.
- 102 There is a lack of systematic service wide strategic thinking and innovation, and the overall approach is reactive rather than proactive. Examples are outlined earlier in the report. A further example is around the action plan to enhance access to services through the website. This has a reference to Street Doctor, which is a part of the County Council website. It enables residents to report issues such as potholes as well as fly tipping, litter and graffiti either on a form or on a map. There is no direct link to Street Doctor on the Council's website, although it is possible to find a link through the abandoned vehicles page. This is a potentially powerful tool and good source of information which is not exploited by the Council and so it is losing the opportunity to engage with the public and use them in its quest to improve the environment. This also shows that there is not a fully joined up approach within the council and other organisations to maximise all resources available.

- 103** Some staff management issues impact adversely on service delivery and improvement. The Council has a strong focus on sickness absence management and is reducing the days lost. However, sickness absence is still high in waste management. This impacts on service delivery and increases costs as agency staff are required to carry out the duties.
- 104** The planned reorganisation is likely to impact on capacity in the short term. The Council is about to begin the recruitment process for the director's post, so it is likely to take several months before the appointee is in post and can begin to have an impact. Feedback on consultation on the Head of Service posts will be considered by cabinet in late April or early May. Any changes proposed in response to consultation will then be circulated for further comment if necessary. So it is likely to be a number of months until the new structure becomes fully effective.
- 105** The service is not adequately developing staff to address customer care issues. Analysis of complaints shows a significant number of complaints about staff behaviour and attitudes, including using obscenities. More than half of front line staff have not received any customer care training. It is also not clear how agency staff will be trained. As front line staff are a key interface with the public it is important that they act as ambassadors for the Council. Managers can also use customer care training to engage all staff and identify service improvements.

Appendix 1 – Service targets for 2007/08

Indicator reference	Description	Target
BV199a	Percentage of land littered to a significant or heavy extent	8%
BV199b	Percentage of relevant land and highways from which unacceptable levels of graffiti are visible	15%
BV199c	Percentage of relevant land from which unacceptable levels of fly posting are visible	1%
BV218b	Percentage of abandoned vehicles removed within 24 hours	85%
Local	Percentage of fly tips removed within two working days	70%
BV82a	Percentage of household waste been sent for recycling	21%
BV82b	Percentage of household waste sent for composting or treatment by anaerobic digestion	16%
BV84b	Percentage change from the previous financial year in the number of Kg of household waste collected per head	+3%
BV91b	Percentage of households served by kerbside collection of at least two recyclables	100%
Local	Number of refuse collections missed per month	12,000