

Corporate Assessment Report

June 2008



Corporate Assessment

Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council

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Introduction

- 1 Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) is the means by which the Audit Commission fulfils its statutory duty under section 99 of the Local Government Act 2003 to make an assessment, and report on the performance, of local authorities. Corporate assessment is one element in the overall assessment that leads to a CPA score and category.
- 2 The purpose of the corporate assessment is to assess how well the Council engages with and leads its communities, delivers community priorities in partnership with others, and ensures continuous improvement across the range of Council activities. It seeks to answer three headline questions which are underpinned by five specific themes.

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

- Ambition
- Prioritisation

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

- Capacity
- Performance management

What has been achieved?

- Achievement

Considered against the shared priorities of:

- sustainable communities and transport;
- safer and stronger communities;
- healthier communities;
- older people; and
- children and young people.

- 3 Corporate assessments are normally aligned with a joint area review of services for children and young people (JAR). In practice this means that the Council's achievements in relation to children and young people are assessed using the evidence provided from the JAR. In addition, examples of outcomes and activity, which are relevant to the other themes and which are identified through the JAR, are considered within the corporate assessment.

- 4 The JAR covers specific services for children and young people that are directly managed or commissioned by the Council, as well as relevant health and youth justice services provided by other bodies. It focuses on the contributions made by services to improving outcomes especially concerning safeguarding; services for looked after children; and services for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The separate JAR report also covers the leadership and management of services for children and young people and, in particular, the way that such services work together to improve outcomes. The description and judgement in respect of children and young people in this report is summarised from the JAR report and the most recently published Annual Performance Assessment from Ofsted which covers all of the Council's children services.

Executive summary

- 5 The Council is performing well. Effective leadership is enabling a focus on reducing inequalities in the borough towards the vision of making Walsall a good place to live, work and invest. There is a clear achievement in regeneration together with improving education and skill levels so that local people are able to fill the jobs created. The Council and partners are on course to deliver the ambition to attract £1.5 billion investment, and create 9,000 new homes and 7,500 new jobs by 2015. Ambitions are tangible. The development of the ring road includes provision for fibre optic communication which is part of the ambition to attract leading edge businesses. The college is being expanded and redeveloped to help improve skill and education levels.
- 6 Priorities reflect the needs of service users and communities. Community engagement is strong and each neighbourhood has a plan to address specific issues. Good partnership working, notably through the local neighbourhood partnerships, results in services and action plans that are shaped to meet the needs of users and are well understood. Strategies and plans focus on the needs of the most vulnerable. For example, plans to improve attainment for children and young people differentiate the approach depending on the assessed barriers for different sectors of the community. However, the needs of older people are not fully addressed. Housing strategies include objectives and actions to promote community cohesion and inclusion in addition to more specific housing objectives.
- 7 Political and managerial leadership is effective. This has contributed to building a shared commitment to, and understanding of, ambitions and priorities. For example, partners share a commitment to raising aspirations and increasing the life chances of young people. There is strong partnership working with the Urban Regeneration Company. The new Chief Executive has a clear vision for the future and brings added momentum and capacity for improvement.
- 8 Overall the Council focuses well on users and the diverse needs of the population. Communication has improved and there is strong engagement with neighbourhoods. Service users, including those from minority groups are often involved in the planning and review of services. For example, gypsies and travellers have influenced the development of the housing strategy. The Council is making good progress towards achieving Level 3 of the equalities standard in 2008.
- 9 The Council has adequate capacity to deliver priorities. Focus has been maintained on improving services but capacity has not been optimised to ensure the rate of improvement aimed for is always achieved. It is important that the Council ensures it has sufficient managerial capacity at the most senior level in order to increase momentum and deliver its stretching ambitions. There are areas of concern such as high sickness absence, and some support services are still not consistently supporting the delivery of ambitions and priorities.

- 10 A robust comprehensive performance management framework has ensured improvement in priority areas. Financial and risk management are well integrated. Programme and project management are well established and help the Council to stay on track. The improvement trend in performance indicators compares well with others. Staff are clear about what is expected of them. A strong focus on performance has enabled improvements in services which are important to the delivery of priorities such as planning and benefits.
- 11 There is sustained focus on value for money with good financial planning and management. Although overall expenditure is high the medium term financial strategy, aims to deliver comparatively low council tax rises to further improve value for money.
- 12 The Council and its partners are delivering improvements in many areas that matter most to local people. Public satisfaction has increased. Crime and fear of crime has reduced, although it remains higher than average. Economic development has been prioritised and major investment has been attracted to the town centre and the most deprived neighbourhoods. This has helped to create and safeguard jobs. Alongside this is a continued focus on raising educational achievement and skill levels. The Council, in partnership with Education Walsall, delivers good services for children and young people and achieves sustained improvement. Key services, such as planning, perform well and support broader ambitions. Work with the health service is having an impact, for example by increasing life expectancy and focusing on prevention by encouraging exercise and weight loss. However, further progress is required to narrow health inequalities and significantly reduce high infant mortality. Walsall has a high and increasing older population but the Council is making comparatively slow progress in developing an approach to supporting the quality of life and independence of all people over 50.

Areas for improvement

- 13 The Council has agreed challenging long term ambitions for the area, set out in the Sustainable Community Strategy. These reflect the corporate objectives of the Council. The Council also has a medium term objective to improve value for money by reducing expenditure and setting comparatively low council tax increases. This will heighten the importance of ensuring that capacity is fully developed and optimised, and the Council should ensure that:
 - support services, in particular HR, ICT and Legal, are developed and organised to fully support the ambitions and priorities of the Council;
 - senior management capacity is sufficient to increase momentum;
 - a more holistic approach is taken to the delivery of outcomes, for example through the further development of scrutiny; and
 - it invests in improving voluntary sector infrastructure and relationships to improve its capacity to contribute to delivery
- 14 Ensure that the future needs of all sectors of the community are met, in particular older people and vulnerable groups by:
 - further developing strategies which explicitly identify and address needs and focus service delivery accordingly.

Summary of assessment scores

Headline questions	Theme	Score*
What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?	Ambition	3
	Prioritisation	3
What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?	Capacity	2
	Performance management	3
What has been achieved?	Achievement	3
Overall corporate assessment score**		3
*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		

**Rules for determining the overall corporate assessment score

Scores on 5 themes	Overall corporate assessment score
Two or more themes with a score of 4 None less than score of 3	4
Three or more themes with a score of 3 or more None less than score of 2	3
Three or more themes with a score of 2 or more	2
Any other combination	1

Context

The locality

- 15 Walsall is a component area of the West Midlands conurbation and is situated in the Black Country. The borough was formed in 1974 and latest statistics (2006) indicate the population is 254 500. It is made up of a number of district centre settlements which to an extent retain separate identities. The borough covers 106 square kilometres with approximately one third open space. The economic history is one of heavy industry. Regeneration has focused on diversifying the economy and a key challenge is to raise aspirations and skill levels. In 2007 average house prices were £136,000, which is significantly below the national average of £184,000. Owner occupation is four percentage points lower than the national average and social rented eight percentage points above average at 27 per cent.
- 16 13.6 per cent of Walsall residents are from Black and Ethnic Minority (BME) backgrounds. This includes 1.4 per cent, African Caribbean and 10.4 per cent Asian and Chinese. Twenty three point eight per cent of under-5s are from BME backgrounds. The area is experiencing an increase in economic migrants from Eastern Europe. Walsall has a comparatively high dependent population with a higher than average proportion aged under 24 and over 60. Projections over the next ten years are for a seven per cent reduction in young people and a 21 per cent increase in people aged over 60.
- 17 Inequality is a significant issue. Twenty-nine of the borough's 169 Super Output Areas (SOAs) fall within the ten per cent most deprived SOAs in England. Health indices show a clear east/west split with poor health in western areas. Thirty nine point four per cent of households have one or more residents with a long term illness (compared to 34.1 per cent nationally). Particular issues include heart disease, cancer and teenage pregnancy. Infant mortality is increasing. The life expectancy gap between the best and worst wards in Walsall is significant at around 8 years, and overall life expectancy is lower in Walsall than the England average.
- 18 Reducing crime is a priority for residents. Crime in Walsall is higher than average but has reduced significantly with a 32 per cent reduction in total crime between 2000/01 and 2006/07.
- 19 Over the last ten years worklessness has reduced from 5.8 per cent to 3.8 per cent. The Council aspires to reduce this to the national average of 2.3 per cent. Walsall has a higher rate of people in receipt of out-of-work benefits than either the West Midlands as a whole or England. Almost one person in five of Walsall's resident working age population is in receipt of benefit, which is far higher than the regional and national averages of 15.7 per cent and 13.7 per cent respectively. Walsall has a higher proportion of 18 to 24 year olds claiming job seeker allowance than the national equivalents.

The Council

- 20** Walsall is a unitary council divided into 20 wards represented by 60 ward councillors. The Conservative Party are the largest group within the Council, controlling 33 of the 60 available seats after 2007 elections, as below:
- Conservative 33
 - Independent 2
 - Labour 18
 - Lib Dem 6
 - Dem Labour 1
- 21** The leader and cabinet constitutional model has been adopted. The current Leader became the new Leader on 21 May 2007 following the elections. He was formerly deputy Leader. Following the election there were a number of changes to the Cabinet.
- 22** In January 2008 a new permanent Chief Executive was appointed. The interim Chief Executive returned to his substantive position of Director of Social Care and Inclusion. The Council includes five directorates:
- Children and Young People;
 - Corporate Services;
 - Neighbourhood Services;
 - Social Care and Inclusion; and
 - Regeneration.
- 23** Consultation has identified that the issues that most influence resident satisfaction are litter, activities for young people, road and pavement repairs, crime and vandalism, speeding traffic and levels of council tax.
- 24** The Council has transferred its housing stock and its partners are on track to meet the decent homes standard by 2010. At the end of March 2007, 84 per cent of the stock met the standard.
- 25** For 2007/08 the Council set a gross revenue budget of £630.9 million (net budget of £212.9 million), with a council tax rise of 3.89 per cent.
- 26** The last Corporate Assessment (under the previous methodology) was carried out in 2005 and judged the Council to be 'Good'. The current Comprehensive Performance Assessment rating is three-star 'improving well'.

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

Ambition

- 27 The Council is performing well in this area. It works well with partners and communities to understand need and has translated this into clear long term ambitions and specific objectives. Ambitions are centred on economic development and education and are owned by key partners, staff and councillors. The Council is well placed to achieve the vision of making Walsall a good place to live, work and invest by reducing inequalities.
- 28 The Council and its partners have a clear and well understood long term vision for the area which addresses specific needs. In 2003, the vision was set within the newly developed sub-regional vision for the Black Country. This has now been revised through the development of the Sustainable Community Strategy. The vision for 2021 is for Walsall to be a good place to live, work and invest. Partners share the vision for the area and understand how this can be delivered. The key objective to achieve this is to reduce inequality through regeneration and raise education and skill levels so local people can fill the jobs created. The vision is supported by themes of people, places and prosperity. Each theme sets out outcome objectives, for example for local neighbourhoods to be accessible, secure, safe and clean and identifies how this will be achieved. The 12 year ambition is supported by six year priorities and a three year delivery plan (the Local Area Agreement). These link to the Council's Corporate Plan, which sets out how the Council will contribute to the delivery of ambitions for the area. This enables the Council and its partners to ensure their actions contribute to improving the quality of life of residents.
- 29 The Council and its key partners are effective in shaping and delivering ambitions for the area. In 2006 the Council decided that the Local Area Agreement would be the main delivery vehicle for meeting the needs of the area. This was effectively consulted upon with partners and has influenced the development of the Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS). Key partners such as the education provider, Primary Care Trust and Urban Regeneration Company have shaped ambitions and understand the contribution they can make. For example, partners share a commitment to raising aspirations and increasing the life chances of young people. Good leadership across the partnership is evident particularly from the Director of Children's Services and the Cabinet Member for Children's Services with good corporate support for improving children's services. Local neighbourhood partnerships enable engagement with communities on the development of ambitions for the area and for specific communities. Partnership with the voluntary and community sectors are less robust, and the Council recognises this as an area for improvement. Key partners and communities understand and own ambitions and are committed to delivery.

- 30** Ambitions are stretching and have clear objectives. The clarity of vision helped inform the decision to create an Urban Regeneration Company. Ambitious objectives include attracting £750 million investment, and creating 1500 new homes and 7,500 new jobs by 2015. The Council is on course to deliver these objectives. Future plans include the creation of a 'gigaport', which will enable communication which is over 100 times faster than broadband. The objective, as set out in development plans, is for the town centre to attract leading edge business and data centres. Current developments (for example the ring road) include provision for this. The expansion and redevelopment of the further education college is underway and is a key element of the aim to improve skill levels and education. Ambitions are helping to drive quality of life improvements for residents.
- 31** Ambitions and priorities are informed by strong data analysis and interpretation. Information is shared between partners to inform the setting of ambitions and priorities. The Shared Partnership and Information Resource (SPIR) was established in 2004. This assembles data in one place for all partners. This includes national, regional and local intelligence; for example, the Office for National Statistics and operational and local data on crime and health. This is analysed at a ward and more local level. Quarterly reports are produced for the Local Strategic Partnership. Analysis has informed ambitions and prioritisation, for example, relating to worklessness. This has enabled ambitions to focus on those things that matter most to local people.
- 32** Community consultation and involvement in developing borough-wide and local ambitions and priority setting is robust. Local neighbourhood partnerships are supported by the Local Strategic Partnership. Each neighbourhood in Walsall has its own plans which represent resident ambitions for that area and support the broader ambitions for the town. For example, regeneration plans are influenced by communities who are engaged in their development. Ward councillors are active in feeding community need into strategic plans. This helps to ensure a good connection between 'top down' and 'bottom up' planning.

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- 33** The Council and partners interpret data and information from consultation to set challenging ambitions which meet the needs of most sections of the community. However, ambitions do not fully recognise the needs of the growing and above-average older people population. The Council puts a lot of effort into understanding the needs of minority groups. The Children and Young People Partnership Board includes Walsall Multi Faith Forum, Youth Opinion Unite, users of services and the voluntary sector. The Council consults and communicates with a range of groups representing diverse communities such as the Multi-Faith Forum, Walsall Voluntary Action and the Community Empowerment Network. The Council 'People and Places Perspective' analyses statistical data and combines this with the views of a wide range of stakeholders. This identifies issues for ranges of people. For example, the housing strategy contains comprehensive analysis of the demographic data and relates this to the relative deprivation/affluence of different BME groups. The Council has commissioned studies to identify need, demand and aspirations of BME communities. This recognises differing needs and has informed the strategy. For example it recognises that many African Caribbean residents prefer to remain in social housing compared to South Asian groups who prefer owner occupation. This means that ambitions are differentiated to meet particular community needs.
- 34** The Council is playing a significant and appropriate role in leading improvement for the area. There is good political and managerial leadership. Leaders champion Walsall at a regional level and local level. Senior councillors have influenced the sub-regional plan (the Black Country plan) and are leading regional developments, for example on transportation. Local neighbourhood partnerships are chaired by councillors. This includes engagement with the police, health and council departments to resolve community concerns such as anti-social behaviour. Leadership is evident in delivering ambitions for children from the BME community, in particular with regard to safeguarding children. For example, a good practice guide to safeguarding children in Islamic Complementary Schools has been developed with partners.
- 35** The Council takes difficult decisions to achieve objectives. Recent examples include the removal of the street warden service, the transfer of residential care homes to a charity and registered social landlord and the development of the new education contract. These have clear objectives to improve the quality of life for residents and allocate resources accordingly.

Prioritisation

- 36** The Council is performing well in this area. Priorities link to longer-term ambitions and are underpinned by annual pledges which target activity to deliver specified outcomes. Engagement is effective and priorities reflect the needs of most members of the community. Each neighbourhood has a plan to address specific issues. Strong partnership working and engagement notably through the local neighbourhood partnerships results in services and action plans that are shaped to meet the needs of users and are well understood. Investment is made in accordance with priorities.

- 37 The Council's corporate planning framework links well with the strategic priorities for the area. These strategic priorities are supported by ten medium-term priorities set out in the corporate plan. They are also effectively supported by annual objectives (pledges) to help ensure their delivery. These set out actions during the year that will contribute to the delivery of the priority. For example, to ensure a clean and green borough in 2007/08, the corporate plan sets out pledges to implement clear standards of quality and service in the twenty five major parks in Walsall and to extend the garden waste collection service to a further 16,500 households. Most pledges identify outcomes although some do not. For example, one pledge is to increase by 15 per cent the number of BME people receiving care packages, whereas another is to spend £400,000 on further improving our major transport corridors. Strong links between ambitions, priorities and delivery strategies and plans enable focus on what matters most to residents.
- 38 Priorities reflect the needs of most residents and communities. Priorities are generally based on a good understanding of the needs of the borough and neighbourhoods. Areas of high deprivation are explicitly targeted for regeneration. Local neighbourhood partnerships (LNPs) enable communities to shape the delivery of services and development of the area. For example, communities are engaged in regeneration projects and have been involved in selecting consultants to develop plans for the area and formed part of project reference groups. However, across the Council priorities and strategies are not well developed to enhance the well-being and sustain the independence of older people. Overall effective prioritising is helping the delivery of improvement where there is greatest need.
- 39 Priorities are well communicated and understood. Consultation, effective engagement and strong councillor representation mean communities have a good understanding about priorities for their area. Councillors are clear about overall objectives and recognise how neighbourhood priorities contribute to these. Staff are also clear about their role and contribution to planned improvements. Partners are involved in developing priorities for the borough and for neighbourhoods, for example through the LNPs, which helps them to work effectively with the Council on their delivery. This means that key stakeholders are working with a common purpose.

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- 40 Key strategies and plans effectively support the delivery of ambitions and priorities. The Strategic Regeneration Framework was commissioned and developed in partnership with the Walsall Housing Group and set clear priorities for ten transformational projects in the borough and these are now being delivered. The Housing Strategy has clear objectives which include promoting community cohesion and social inclusion, and capitalising on cultural diversity in addition to more specific housing objectives. Partners including the Housing Partnership, the Disability Forum and the Gypsy and Traveller Forum contributed to the development of the strategy. In education, plans illustrate commitment to work in partnership to promote the Every Child Matters agenda. The five year Medium Term Financial Strategy is linked to other strategies and priorities for investment and improvement. However, not all strategies are embedded. For example, the community cohesion strategy has only recently been introduced. Effective strategies enable a focus on community outcomes.
- 41 Action plans are effective in enabling focus on the delivery of priorities, although some could be more robust. Many action plans are well defined, such as the Library Modernisation Plan. However, some do not clearly identify milestones and responsibilities. These include the Crime and Disorder and Drug Misuse Reduction Strategy and the Draft Communication Strategy.
- 42 The effectiveness of strategies is reviewed and resources targeted in accordance with priorities. For example, because it was not having the desired impact the Council disinvested in community warden provision. Efficiency savings are invested in priorities such as preventative work in social care with the objective that this will enable funding reductions in the medium term.
- 43 Effective prioritisation is focusing services to meet the needs of all parts of the community. Some measures are geared towards ensuring the inclusion of groups that may not respond to traditional methods of engagement. The Local Development Framework was a result of robust consultation which involved the Community Empowerment Network to evaluate success and identify areas for further engagement. Each neighbourhood has a plan identifying specific needs, informed by engagement with different sectors of the community such as the youth council. In children's services, increasing the educational attainment of BME pupils is a priority and discussions have taken place with the Muslim community about how children can become involved in the increasing number of extra curricular activities without affecting their mosque attendance. This is enabling the Council and its partners to improve outcomes for residents.

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

Capacity

- 44 The Council is performing adequately in this area. The Council has experienced a period of challenge to its strategic capacity and this has slowed progress in some areas. Momentum is now set to increase with new senior appointments and some key issues are being tackled, but there are still areas of weakness such as high sickness absence, and some support services are still not consistently supporting the delivery of ambitions and priorities. Effective medium term financial management supports the delivery of priorities and the Council performs well in its use of resources.
- 45 Relationships within the Council have improved, enabling improved leadership, accountability and decision-making. The Council has emerged from a period when some relationships between officers and councillors were strained. There is now clarity among both officers and councillors about respective roles and responsibilities with greater openness and mutual respect, enabling effective leadership and better informed and transparent decision making. Capacity has been strengthened by the appointment of an experienced permanent Chief Executive. Importantly, the Council is now seeking to ensure it has sufficient senior level capacity to deliver the challenging and ambitious agenda for Walsall. The Standards Committee is effective in its role, and councillors are supported with training and advice on working within the ethical framework. Previous concerns about ethics and standards are receding. There is effective cross-party working particularly in relation to the new contract for children and young people's services. Effective relationships and clarity about roles are improving capacity.
- 46 Scrutiny is making a good contribution in some areas, as councillors have increased their understanding of its role, but overall its impact is variable. There are examples of good work, such as in improving revenues and benefits. However, in some areas scrutiny is not involved or its recommendations do not make a difference. For example, the recent scrutiny of the budget has not challenged the executive's plans. Work programmes are linked to the forward plan, although there is limited co-ordination of the work of the five panels and officer support is limited. The involvement of stakeholders in scrutiny is a growing strength, such as in the work examining relocation of the market or in changing day provision for adults with learning disabilities. However, the Council is not consistently realising the potential benefits of robust and challenging scrutiny.

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- 47** The Council's investment in the capacity of councillors is effective. A councillor working group oversees a comprehensive development programme. Councillors have individual development plans. Take-up of training opportunities is high. The Council has the LGA Member Development Charter and senior councillors have participated in the IDEA Leadership Academy. Cabinet members show leadership and knowledge of their portfolios and the relationships between them. This investment is helping Councillors be effective in their roles.
- 48** Strategic workforce planning is underdeveloped. There are recent workforce plans for adult social care and for children's services, but elsewhere planning has been inconsistent and does not generally engage partners. The existing workforce plans recognise the need for a diverse workforce, and the current workforce profile reflects the local community in most respects. Work is underway to develop an overarching strategy, but as yet there is no robust corporate approach to anticipating, securing and developing the workforce the Council needs to deliver its priorities. Lack of corporate workforce planning reduces the likelihood that the Council will meet all of its future workforce needs.
- 49** The Council is not managing sickness absence effectively, and this is having a significant impact on capacity. Sickness levels across the Council have been among the worst 25 per cent in the country for two years, and are continuing to rise. In 2005/06 11.4 days were lost for each full time member of staff, rising to 14.5 days in 2006/07. Managers' implementation of the sickness absence policy has until recently been poor, with, for example, few return-to-work interviews being undertaken. This is improving but has not yet reduced absence levels. Long term sickness is having an impact in some key areas such as the ASB team. Concerns about the accuracy of the information distract from identifying and tackling the underlying issues. A task group has been established and the Council is now investing additional resources in the Well-being Agenda and improving the information flow through the 'HRD portal'. Continuing high levels of sickness pose a risk to delivery of priorities.
- 50** Effective medium term financial planning and management support the delivery of priorities. The Medium Term Financial Strategy identifies the resources needed to deliver priorities and the Council makes efficiency savings to fund them, and to deliver the aim of progressively reducing council tax to the West Midlands average. Overspending in demand-led services such as adult social care is managed effectively in-year. The Council performs well in its use of resources. Good financial planning and management helps ensure that priorities are achievable.

- 51 The Council has been slow in developing adequate support services. The Council recognised the need for investment and improvement in support services and explored partnership arrangements to deliver this. During this time there was little investment in support services and they have not been in a position to fully support the aims of the Council. Following a decision to withdraw from partnership negotiations the Council established its own transformation programme. As a result efficiency savings are being delivered and services such as ICT and human resource management are now developing, but others, such as legal, still lack effective capacity to meet the organisation's needs. This means that the capacity of support services have not been sufficiently developed to fully support the delivery of priorities and ambitions.
- 52 Effective management is increasing capacity and impact in some areas. Strong project and programme management is ensuring robust implementation of strategic improvement projects. Risk management is well-developed and effective. The Council provides good value for money, and has effective mechanisms to ensure it continues to improve.
- 53 Improved strategic procurement is helping achieve efficiency savings and improve services. The Council is strengthening its capacity in this area through building the capacity of the team and revising and improving its strategy. Some significant contracts have been let recently. As well as the re-tendering for children's services, the Council has secured an improved community meals service by externalising it, and entered into partnership with Housing 21 to transform its adult residential provision for older people. Good learning from work on the education contract has been used effectively in these procurements. Cashable savings of £1 million have been delivered through improved procurement this year, and the re-engineering of business support secured £930,000, or 10 per cent of its revenue budget. Overall, the Transformation Programme achieved savings of £1.4 million in 2006/07 and is on target to deliver £2.2 million in 2007/08.
- 54 Strong partnership working is significantly enhancing capacity in key areas. For example, strong and effective relationships with the Urban Regeneration Company are helping achieve regeneration ambitions and deliver significant projects. The Children and Young People's Partnership is effective. The contractual partnership for education services has improved standards, and the new contract offers scope to improve them further. Some effective work with health is having an impact on health inequalities. The Council and its partners are increasing their impact by working together.
- 55 The structure of the Walsall Borough Strategic Partnership (WBSP) has not consistently been effective in facilitating cross-cutting work. This is being addressed through the review of its structure initiated in 2007 linked to the development of a new Sustainable Community Strategy and local area agreement which includes cross cutting targets. This aims to strengthen and maximise the delivery and impact of some effective work that has taken place within the Pillar Groups.

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- 56** Improved 'joined-up' working internally is now placing the Council in a stronger position to make progress on cross-cutting issues. For example, a development team approach is taken on planning applications. This has improved responsiveness and contributed to the private sector perception that Walsall is now an attractive proposition for new developments. This supports economic development ambitions.
- 57** The approach to working with the voluntary and community sectors is not strategic. Work on partnering, procuring and commissioning services is not joined up across departments and there is no joint workforce planning. The Council is not maximising the capacity of joint working with third sector partners and relationships are weaker than those with statutory agencies. This is a recognised weakness and there are plans to increase support and investment in the sector, such as through the CYPP.
- 58** The Council is ensuring that equalities are more integrated into service delivery and employment. It is making good progress towards achieving Level 3 of the equalities standard in 2008. Some equality impact assessments influence service development but the action plans are not specific in others. However, services are responsive to diverse access needs. For example, the translation service has recently been re-specified to meet changing needs. ICT investment is improving access to services and the Council's website is good. The telephone contact centre has improved the experience of contacting the Council. Modernisation of the library service has significantly improved quality and access for a diverse range of users. A high level Equalities Steering Group oversees equality, diversity and access issues, and aims to increase consistency and integration.
- 59** Staff capacity is adequate. Engagement and communication with staff was weak, but is now improving. Staff have appraisals that help them understand their contribution and are positive about training and development opportunities. There are plans to address weaknesses in the structure and management of support and central services following the decision not to proceed with the Strategic Partnership. In most areas the Council has the staff and managerial capacity that it needs.

Performance management

- 60** The Council is performing well in this area. Robust performance management has contributed well to improving the Council's delivery of key services. Actively managing performance is integral to all managers' work. Performance improvement compares well nationally. Cabinet members have a good understanding of performance management and the Beacon Index has helped to focus attention on priorities. But the challenge from scrutiny is inconsistent. Performance is actively and effectively managed in key partnerships. The Council responds well to external challenge and to complaints from the public.

- 61** The Council has robust systems for performance management. The performance planning framework influences service planning. It outlines an annual planning cycle; sets out the role and requirements of directorate based performance boards and spells out the integration of managing performance with customer satisfaction, risk, project and financial management. Progress against the corporate priorities, annual pledges (published targets) and other indicators of corporate improvement is reported quarterly to councillors and senior officers (the Beacon Index) providing a good overview of corporate performance. There is a clear link from the Corporate Plan through directorate and service plans to individual target setting. This means that the Council is well placed to deliver its priorities.
- 62** Managers have a strong focus on performance. They are clear about objectives and routinely use performance information to manage services. Between 2005/06 and 2006/07, 70 per cent of best value performance indicators improved which is significantly above average when compared nationally. Underperformance leads to corrective action plans monitored by monthly performance boards. Poor performance in benefits processing led to monthly reporting to a monitoring board. New claims processing was improved by 74 per cent while making savings of £365,000 in 2007/08. This means that the Council can ensure that services stay on track.
- 63** Performance management drives improvement in accordance with priorities. The Council has improved performance in key priority areas. Children's services have been improved from being so poor that in 2002 education was removed from the control of the Council to one where attainment of 16 year olds in 2007 exceeded targets agreed with the Department for Children, Schools and Families. In environmental services, waste recycling has doubled in three years and in housing the completion of affordable homes has improved from among the worst performance to above average. In lower priority areas the rate of progress has been slower. Improvements in adult social care services have been identified but implementation of plans to address these is recent although some performance indicators are now showing improvement.
- 64** Benchmarking is generally good and is used to set challenging targets, such as reducing the time taken to provide care packages to older people. Comparisons are made with statistical neighbours, metropolitan councils and West Midland councils as well as nationally. However, on occasions selective comparisons and a focus on rates of improvement rather than absolute performance can lead the Council to an incomplete picture of relative performance and inhibit challenge.

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

- 65** Cabinet members have a strong focus on performance management. However scrutiny is less effective. Portfolio holders meet with senior officers monthly to review and challenge performance and agree remedial measures. Cabinet members have a sound understanding of performance issues in their portfolios. The Cabinet takes a quarterly overview of the Beacon Index and uses comparative data to make decisions, for example on the frequency of household waste and recycling collections. However, Councillors are not always aware of performance issues. For example, high sickness absence rates have only recently been recognised as an important issue. Scrutiny panels monitor performance, receiving the same reports as cabinet members, but they are not consistently effective in focusing on underperformance or actively challenging the executive.
- 66** Performance management in key partnerships is effective. The LAA is the action plan for the Community Plan and is generally well performance managed using timely and accurate information produced by the Council's data and monitoring systems. For example, the Safer and Stronger Communities Partnership has used data well to identify and focus on crime hotspots. Targeted activities in the areas of Caldmore Green, Birchills and Beechdale resulted in reductions in crime and anti-social behaviour and drug use. Residents and businesses report that they were pleased with the activity and felt safer. This means the Council and its partners are focused on improving the quality of life for residents.
- 67** The Council responds effectively to external assessment and learns from its own experiences. Improvements in children's services and housing followed poor inspection reports. The Council's systems had identified under performance in adult care and the supporting people service prior to inspections and it has responded to the outcomes with robust improvement plans. In the past, the good performance management of the outsourced education contract was dependant on trust and good working relationships because managing performance was not built into the contract. The new education contract sets out performance and performance management requirements clearly. This contract is viewed by the Council as a useful template for future major contracts.
- 68** The Council has a comprehensive framework for setting and reviewing individual staff performance. Individual measurable targets relating to team and service priorities are set. Appraisals are well structured and result in action. This means that staff understand the individual contribution they make to delivering priorities.
- 69** The Council involves residents well in setting priorities and reviewing performance locally. This is through local neighbourhood partnerships which are effective in developing local priorities and action plans to improve specific outcomes in the area. The Council publishes information about its overall performance to its staff and the public through regular publications and the internet. Service standards are available on the internet for a wide range of services although they are not readily available in the First Stop Shop. Most people are able to gauge whether the Council is delivering the service it promises.

- 70 The Council responds well to complaints. It has improved its publicity about and access to the complaints process so that the number of registered complaints has more than doubled in the last two years. The Council analyses these well to make improvements and actions are monitored through a performance board. Outcomes include changing traffic lights sequencing to reduce tailbacks and increasing access to internet usage in libraries to support personal study. Services are now better geared to people's needs.
- 71 Performance management of equalities issues is variable. Regular perception surveys and consultations allow the Council to gather information from service users and specific communities in order to assess performance and take action to improve it. The Council has undertaken a rigorous data gathering exercise to inform the local area panels and strategies. Based on this feedback the Council has targeted specific communities where there is low take up of services to ensure BME and other disadvantaged groups are engaged. Members of the Young People's Disability Forum are trained and used as youth inspectors of youth clubs and youth projects. Equalities impact statements are widely used. However, some equalities action plans do not identify measurable actions. Therefore the Council is not consistently able to ensure it provides services which are equitable and accessible.

What has been achieved?

- 72 The Council is performing well in this area. There are significant achievements across shared priority areas and improvements are recognised by residents.
- 73 The Council's local priorities are well aligned with national priorities. They recognise the particular issues facing Walsall and emphasise the need to address the cause of problems. Deprivation and inequalities are major issues. The Council and its partners have prioritised regeneration and been successful in attracting major investment to the town centre and most deprived neighbourhoods. Alongside this is a continued focus on raising educational achievement and skill levels to equip local people to fill the jobs created. The Council, in partnership with Education Walsall, delivers good services for children and young people and achieves sustained improvement. Effective prioritisation and robust performance management has enabled significant service improvement over the last few years. Community leadership has developed and the Council is well placed to play an increasingly influential role in the region.
- 74 The Council and partners have a strong focus on developing sustainable communities. Although worklessness remains high there is evidence that jobs created through regeneration are beginning to have an impact. There is a positive relationship with the business community and a focus through the regeneration company on attracting new employers. The strategic role in housing shapes provision to meet need. Environmental services have continued to improve. The planning service performs well and a holistic approach to planning and development supports regeneration ambitions. Transport improvements have and are being made. A ring road is under construction and some initiatives have increased bus use.
- 75 Crime and fear of crime have continued to reduce. Local neighbourhood partnerships enable partners to work together to tackle crime and anti social behaviour at a local level. Effective action is taken to deal with anti-social behaviour. A robust system is in place to ensure that victims of domestic violence are identified and responded to appropriately. Drug and Alcohol Action Team (DAAT) performance in most areas is satisfactory or better. Road safety is good in comparison to others and improving. There are many examples of good work with communities to develop community cohesion although the development of the overall community cohesion strategy is recent. Effective tension monitoring ensures the Council and partners are alerted to potential issues at an early stage.
- 76 The Council and partners are having an impact on the health of communities in some areas, although significant challenges remain. For example the proportion of smokers has reduced significantly but is still above the regional average. Infant mortality is increasing significantly. Teenage pregnancy is reducing at a faster rate in Walsall than in most other areas. The significant gap in life expectancy between the most and least deprived parts of the borough is reducing. Work with health partners is targeted at prevention, for example by encouraging exercise and involving families in weight loss programmes.

- 77 The Council's strategic approach to meeting the needs of older people is underdeveloped. The borough has a high and increasing older population but is making comparatively slow progress in developing an approach to supporting the quality of life and independence of all people over 50. Some social care services are not meeting the needs of the rising numbers of vulnerable older people.

Sustainable communities and transport

- 78 The Council is taking a lead in contributing to the local economy through physical regeneration, skills development, and job creation. There is a strong partnership with the successful Urban Regeneration Company. The town centre (as the economic hub) and most deprived areas have been targeted for regeneration and economic growth and good progress is being made. Although worklessness remains an issue increases have been lower than across the sub region. Ninety hectares of land has been made available for development and 7,000 jobs created or safeguarded. Major employers have been attracted. The Council and partners are on target to attract £1.5 billion of investment by 2015.
- 79 The Council has successfully secured jobs for local people. The Think Walsall initiative ensures local people gain jobs from new employers. The retail academy project ensured local people were trained in advance of a major supermarket opening. The new construction training scheme developed with partners ensures local people are trained to work on development schemes and therefore benefit immediately from regeneration. The Council is currently assisting six large businesses with growth plans to remain in the borough.
- 80 The Council and partners are successful in attracting external funding. Since 2000, the Council has attracted over £100 million in grants and over £796 million of investment has been secured in Walsall town centre. This includes £180 million Walsall Waterfront, £100 million Business and Learning Campus and the £170 million redevelopment of Walsall Manor hospital.
- 81 The Council is influencing housing provision in accordance with local need. It has strong partnerships with housing providers and developers and a well informed picture of need. Supplementary planning guidance has been produced to support the housing strategy and influence the provision of affordable housing. Recent development has concentrated on deprived areas. Strategies clearly identify and differentiate need between different sectors of the community. For example the provision of five and six-bedroom housing to accommodate larger families. Future plans include higher quality waterfront housing to enable those filling higher paid new jobs to live in Walsall and support the local economy. Work with the Walsall Housing Group has helped to ensure good progress towards meeting the decent homes standard in 2010. In March 2007, 84 per cent of housing was assessed to meet the standard.

- 82 The Council and partners have improved the environment for residents. In 2006/07 recycling and composting was above the average, and the amount of waste collected reduced significantly. Satisfaction with recycling and waste disposal is amongst the best when compared nationally. Litter and detritus has been halved. Planning performance is strong and a holistic approach is taken to development to ensure opportunities are maximised. The Council is beginning to address some local and global environmental issues and make public commitments to environmental sustainability. It has adopted a climate change strategy and action plan, and signed the Nottingham Declaration. A Walsall environment forum has been established, and the Council is delivering a Birmingham and Black Country bio-diversity action plan. Internally, an Environment Champions Network has helped to reduce gas consumption by 14 per cent between 2003/04 and 2006/07.
- 83 Improvements are being made to the physical environment. The attractiveness and safety of parks, play areas and public spaces has improved. Examples include creating or improving 49 play and youth facilities (through the £3.2 million transforming your space initiative), the £7.8 million restoration of Willenhall Memorial Park and Palfrey Park, resulting in the first Green Flag award in Walsall. A new civic quarter within Walsall town centre has been created as part of an overall programme valued at £4 million since 2002. Sixty five historic properties have been restored.
- 84 Access to public transport is improving. Bus priority lanes and real time information have been introduced. There has been investment to improve bus stops and shelters across the region. Satisfaction with public transport is improving substantially.
- 85 Progress is being made to manage traffic more effectively. The traffic control centre is planned to be upgraded and variable message signage enables traffic to be more effectively managed. Work with the Highways Agency aims to deliver variable speed limits on the M6 motorway which should reduce congestion and pollution. Plans for future improvement include the extension of the metro line, extending the rail link between Walsall and Wolverhampton, and park and ride facilities.
- 86 Transport initiatives are targeted at reducing deprivation. The Workwise scheme provides free bus travel for unemployed people attending job interviews. The new school TravelWise website was launched in March 2008. This includes information about journey planning, carbon savings and calories burned if non car transport is used, and mapping of transport facilities.

Safer and stronger communities

- 87 Action to tackle crime, particularly in identified priority areas is successful. The Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership has been successful in contributing to a consistent trend of crime reduction. Crime has reduced in comparison to others but is still above average. The CDRP is now in the third quartile for each of the six categories of crime when compared to the Home Office nearest neighbour group. In the previous year (2005/06) it was amongst the worst performing in two of the six categories. A challenging 20 per cent target for crime reduction was set for 2007/08. The Council and partners have taken effective action following an increase in some types of crime and are now on course to deliver an end of year reduction of 17.9 per cent. The Safer and Stronger Communities Partnership (SSCP) effectively uses data to analyse crime hotspots and a multi-agency approach targets intervention work on five main areas of the borough.
- 88 The Council and partners are effective in reducing domestic violence and supporting victims. The Domestic Violence Forum provides a good range of services to help address domestic violence and support families. This includes a 24-hour crisis intervention team, group and individual work with women, families and children. A multi-lingual helpline is available. Prevention is targeted through a 32-week programme for men who want to change their behaviour. The Domestic Abuse Response Team (DART) ensures that all incidents of domestic violence are referred by the police and risk assessed by a multi agency team. Incidents are followed up appropriately in line with the risk assessment.
- 89 Targeted action has reduced the fear of crime. The 2006/07 survey indicates that 93.1 per cent of residents feel safe and secure during the day which exceeds the 2008/09 LAA target of 93 per cent. The Council invests in improving security and perceptions of safety in the community. It has funded a five year programme of interventions. Other initiatives include the extending the use of CCTV and engagement with the community via 230 volunteer 'street champions'. These actions are contributing to an improved sense of safety and security for residents.
- 90 Effective action is taken to deal with anti-social behaviour (ASB). The process for dealing with anti-social behaviour is clear and includes a new 24-hour ASB hotline with dedicated case officers. Since April 2006, 803 of 973 reports have been successfully closed. The results from the 2006/07 satisfaction survey show 26 per cent of residents consider there is a high level of ASB in the borough compared to 46 per cent in 2003/04. The youth offending team helps to address anti-social behaviour. Use is made of referrals to prevention projects prior to consideration of formal measures which means that the Council makes a full attempt to resolve ASB issues before using formal enforcement action.

- 91 The Council is working effectively with partners to tackle drug and alcohol misuse. There is a comprehensive needs analysis of alcohol abuse across the borough and a targeted strategy in place. This contains action plans to reduce alcohol harm amongst children and young people and BME communities, to develop alcohol treatment services locally and reduce the impact of alcohol on crime and disorder. Although timescales and responsibilities are not always clear, the strategy does lay out the key challenges, the interventions needed and a summary of progress made or needed. The Council is proactive in tackling alcohol-related crime particularly through its town centre management framework. Drug treatment arrangements in the borough are good but not always consistent. DAAT performance in most areas is satisfactory or better, but performance on planned discharges is less effective.
- 92 The Council works effectively with partners to reduce accidents. Performance compares well with other councils with low numbers of people killed and seriously injured on roads. Road casualties reduced significantly in 2006/07. The number of children killed or seriously injured has reduced to 50 per cent below the 1994/98 average.
- 93 Emergency planning arrangements are robust. The Council has in place a comprehensive emergency plan for 2007 to 2009 for the management of peacetime incidents. The plan sets out clear roles and responsibilities and links to business continuity management. The Council has a phased approach to developing service level business continuity plans and has prioritised critical services for vulnerable people. Incident management arrangements have enabled effective response. These have been successfully tested in a major incident.
- 94 There are many examples of good work with communities to develop community cohesion. Effective partnership working includes the Stand Together Against Racism Partnership. The Council has worked with the Institute for Community Cohesion to develop its approach. Tension monitoring practice is effective and recognised as good practice. However, the Council is at an early stage in the development of its overall community cohesion strategy. The Council's area based consultation structures are effective, working with the relevant communities and stakeholders to identify and resolve issues.

Healthier communities

- 95 The Council and partners are having a positive impact on the health of communities in some areas, although significant challenges remain.

- 96 There is some good work in partnership at both strategic and operational levels. The Healthier Communities and Vulnerable Adults (HC&VA) Pillar Group of WBSB has focused effectively on LAA targets for health improvement through the 'Increasing Life Expectancy Action Plan 2007-10'. Multi-agency collaboration on falls prevention is effective. However, the cross-cutting focus on health inequalities is inconsistent. The partnership is now developing a health inequalities strategy. This aims to improve co-ordination and ensure action addresses the main issues affecting life expectancy. Partners acknowledge that better co-ordination will add value.
- 97 Information about local need and the determinants of poor health is robust. There is a strong shared understanding of the significant health inequalities that exist within Walsall, and between Walsall and the rest of the country. There are significant gaps in life expectancy, with high infant mortality, and early deaths caused by chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), smoking and falling. Teenage pregnancy, inactivity, obesity and low birth weight babies are all significant issues locally. This understanding helps to focus efforts on priorities for improvement.
- 98 Partners focus on the areas in which they can have most impact. Work has been targeted in localities through local neighbourhood partnerships to reduce teenage pregnancy and smoking levels, and to encourage breastfeeding and good childhood nutrition. Smoking cessation work in the New Deal for Communities area has achieved a significant reduction in smoking from two in three households, to only one in three. Other work has focused on particular communities, such as maternity care with new mothers from BME communities, to tackle disproportionately high levels of infant mortality in those populations. The Council and partners are making an impact in targeted areas and communities.
- 99 Preventative services are targeted at the most disadvantaged and minority groups. Health visitors have been appointed with a specific public health remit to work with travelling families and with women and children experiencing domestic abuse. Walsall's integrated learning disabilities service has increased the take-up of breast screening by eligible women with learning disabilities from 26 per cent two years ago to 100 per cent in 2007. Faith-specific outreach work is taken to places of worship. Recognising and targeting diverse needs increases impact.
- 100 Health improvement work is having a better impact in some areas than others, and some significant challenges remain. For example, more people are giving up smoking. The proportion of smokers has reduced significantly from 28 per cent in 1998 to 20.4 per cent in 2005, although this is still above the regional average. However, infant mortality is increasing significantly. It rose from 5.2 per 1,000 births in 2000 to 10.2 in 2005. Tackling infant mortality has been made a high priority, but remains an area in which the Council and partners are struggling to make improvement.
- 101 Teenage pregnancy is reducing at a faster rate in Walsall than in most other areas. Despite a recent increase, the overall trend has been positive, with a 14.7 per cent reduction between 1998 and 2005. However, incidences remain above average and the partnership is not on track to meet the 2010 LAA target.

- 102** The strategy to prevent falling is helping to tackle a major cause of early death and disability. The EXTEND programme includes education as well as exercise to increase mobility. During 2007, it delivered more than 900 sessions, attracting nearly 11,000 attendances. Forty seven per cent of participants report that they have fallen less often. The numbers of people over 50 years old attending hospital and being admitted after falls have reduced significantly.
- 103** The Council is successfully targeting initiatives to reduce obesity and encourage physical activity in both children and adults. Fun 4 Life has provided children's obesity clinics, mixing physical activity with lifestyle advice, successfully engaging 40 families. It has reduced body fat and waist circumference and increased the lung capacity of participants, who report improved confidence and self-image. Three junior gyms have been provided in the Council's leisure facilities. The creative development team raises awareness about obesity and nutrition at particularly affected groups. The school sports partnership has raised the proportion of pupils participating in two hours of sport a week to 86 per cent, above the national target. Targeted action to prevent health problems is having an impact.
- 104** The Council is working with partners to ensure that local people live in decent homes and to reduce fuel poverty. It has a priority pledge to ensure that 70 per cent of vulnerable people who rent in the private sector will live in decent homes by 2010, and is making good progress towards this. Eighty-four per cent of socially rented houses are decent. The Council is working with the private sector to reduce fuel poverty through initiatives such as providing insulation, heating and energy saving measures. Hypothermia-related deaths have reduced significantly.
- 105** Inequalities in life expectancy remain. Although average life expectancy for both males and females in the borough has increased, it remains below the England average, and although the partnership is impacting on the significant gap between the best and worst wards, it is not meeting LAA targets

Older people

- 106** The Council's strategic approach to meeting the needs of older people is underdeveloped. The borough has a high and increasing older population but is making comparatively slow progress in developing an approach to supporting the quality of life and independence of all people over 50. Work on developing an Older People's Strategy, to address the wider needs and aspirations of older people as citizens, has been comparatively slow. The Council and its partners are now developing a strategic approach to older people's services that is based on a wider view of older people's priorities. It is led by the Older People's Partnership Board (OPPB), which is accountable to the HC&VA Pillar Group and has cross-sector and user and carer representation. Work to 'age-proof' the Council's current strategies and plans has been commissioned, and older people are being better consulted and engaged.

- 107** Leadership for older people has not been sufficiently strong. In social care services there has been a period of reduced senior managerial capacity. While a Councillor has been identified to champion the needs of the over 50 population the profile has been low. Changes and new appointments in the social care and inclusion directorate are increasing capacity and this is starting to have some impact. For example, by addressing financial and performance issues and initiating culture change. Although at an early stage the Council is developing its understanding of the borough wide needs of older people in order to improve targeting and service delivery.
- 108** There is some good recent engagement with older people. The Council's consultative forum for over 50s has influenced priorities in the sustainable community strategy and in Local Neighbourhood Partnership plans. It has also influenced a number of strategies such as the Age Equalities and Green Spaces strategies. Its subgroups focus on security, transport and communication. It has good, active representation from groups whose voice is less often heard, such as BME communities. This enables older people to influence the Council's planning and delivery.
- 109** Adult social care services for older people do not compare well with other councils. In November 2007 The Commission for Social Care Inspection assessed Walsall as a one star authority with uncertain prospects for improvement. Outcomes are assessed as adequate overall, with some areas of good performance. The Council recognises the pace of improvement needs to be raised to ensure greater consistency in front line delivery. Action has been taken to improve business and performance processes and conclude the Housing 21 tender. A recent inspection of the supporting people service judged performance to be poor with uncertain prospects for improvement. Action plans to address the issues have been put in place. Some performance is improving, and better procurement is improving the quality of some services. There is evidence that actions are leading to improvement in social care services to older people.
- 110** Partnership working with health has improved some outcomes for older people. Effective work on intermediate care has helped keep older people out of hospital. Admissions to residential care have reduced significantly over the last few years from among the highest in the country to best performance. Multi-agency work on falls prevention has reduced falls and associated hospital visits and admissions in the over 50s. However, the recent withdrawal of the hospital-based social work team led to increases in the number of delayed discharges. The decision has now been reversed and plans to improve discharges put in place. Partnerships are helping to improve capacity and provide more cohesive services.
- 111** Some services take account of the broader needs of older people. There is some intergenerational work, with plans for more. There are several Over 50s clubs in libraries, and there are volunteer-led guided walks throughout the borough to encourage independence and fitness and bring social benefits. Older people are training younger people to look after allotments and in one area older people began a Junior Neighbourhood Watch Scheme. The Council sees the development of the Older People's Strategy as an opportunity to bring greater focus and co-ordination to this type of initiative.

Children and young people

- 112** Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council, in partnership with Education Walsall, delivers good services for children and young people and achieves sustained improvement. Children are generally healthy and appear safe, with much reduced levels of road deaths and injuries. Good arrangements ensure children in need of protection are identified and supported. Some children's homes do not meet national minimum standards. Education outcomes are adequate and improving although the number of young people participating in education, employment or training post 16 is low. Educational achievement for disadvantaged white males and Bangladeshi and Pakistani young people is below their peers.
- 113** Service management is good. Ambitions for children and young people in Walsall are good. The Council and its partners share a commitment to raising aspirations and increasing the life chances of young people. Good leadership across the partnership is evident particularly from the Director of Children's Services and the Cabinet Member for Children's Services. Corporate support for improving children's services is very good. A strong commitment to multi agency preventative work is reflected in effective joint working and early intervention. Significant thought and care has been taken in negotiating the proposals for a new commissioned contract in line with the Children's Services' priorities.
- 114** The combined work of all local services in securing the health of children and young people has been consolidated since the 2007 Annual Performance Assessment and is good for the majority of children and young people. Health partners work very effectively with the Council to provide well co-ordinated and targeted support. The health needs of looked after children and young people are met effectively and performance indicators exceed national averages. Access to child and adolescent mental health services is variable: looked after children have good support but those known to the youth offending team have long waiting times. Young people known to the youth offending team receive excellent, timely support for substance abuse and good support to promote their physical health including sexual health promotion.
- 115** Children and young people appear safe and arrangements to ensure this are good. They receive good advice and support at school to raise their awareness of healthy lifestyles and risks to their safety. A wide range of preventative services effectively identify and support families at an early stage, reducing the number of children needing to be looked after by the Council. Services to support families affected by domestic abuse are very good. Professionals have an excellent understanding of their safeguarding role. Child protection systems work well and concerns are identified and responded to appropriately. A well co-ordinated approach ensures that incidents of bullying and racism are identified and action taken. Nevertheless bullying remains a concern for many children and young people.

- 116** The 2007 Annual Performance Assessment identifies that the impact of all local services in helping children to enjoy their education and achieve well is good. Educational outcomes have improved in primary schools and are in line with national rates. Although the attendance of looked after children is excellent their achievement continues to be below that found in similar authorities. Inspection findings show that, although most pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make at least satisfactory progress, a smaller proportion make good or better progress in both primary and secondary schools than in similar authorities.
- 117** The impact of all local services in helping children and young people to contribute to society is good. Children and young people have an increasing say in the shaping and delivery of services. The findings of the JAR are less positive than the APA in relation to the engagement of young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and looked after children. Whilst they are appropriately involved in contributing to decisions about important events in their lives, they have limited opportunities to influence the shape of services that support them. Considerable improvements have been made to the provision offered by the youth offending team. However there continues to be a high proportion of young offenders who are not in education, employment and/or training.
- 118** The impact of all local services in helping children and young people to achieve economic well being is adequate. Partnerships to improve provision for 14 to 19 year olds are good although the new borough wide strategy lacks focus and clarity of purpose. There is a strong commitment from partners to raise the aspiration and outcomes for all learners. Employer engagement is strong and schools have good links with the Education Business Partnership. Curriculum and timetables have been dovetailed across providers to ensure a more coherent approach regarding diplomas and other vocational options. It is too soon to judge the impact of these programmes. More young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and care leavers, are in education, employment and training than is the case for young people in the local community as a whole.
- 119** The capacity of Council services to improve is good. There is a strong track record of improvement, effective partnership working and sound planning. Very good use has been made of the new education contract process to take stock and strategically plan for future improvements.

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 Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 28 January to 8 February 2008.
- 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.