

Corporate Assessment

Kent County Council

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Introduction

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.

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 its 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.

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.

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

- 1 Kent County Council (KCC) is performing strongly. It has, with its partners, been early and active in developing clear and appropriate ambitions and priorities to meet the strategic challenges facing the county. The Council often leads beyond the norm for local government and is an outstandingly effective advocate for Kent at all levels including internationally. Well-established partnership work is bringing real improvements to quality of life for local people. Ground-breaking recent pilot projects embrace new technology and aim to personalise services. The Council has for ten years been seeking excellence and its organisation is impressive, high-quality, responsive and gives good value-for-money. But this has required a drive and firmness of direction that is seen by some as over-dominant. The Council recognises that it has reached a stage of maturity where further gains will depend on a more inclusive approach, internally and externally. It has taken early steps, but needs to do more to achieve its ambition of fully-integrated public services that are well-targeted on the needs of the people of Kent. A minority of services under-perform, and in some shared priorities work is at an early stage.
- 2 The Council is unusually outward-looking, which gives it important strengths. Horizon-scanning is high. It provides a strong voice for Kent, building high-level alliances, including with government departments where its drive for innovation is creating interest in testing new ideas jointly, despite having a different ruling party. It has well-developed strategic partnerships including internationally. It gives more time and attention to learning from other types of organisation, such as retail, than is usual in local government. It translates this learning effectively through the organisation into an alertness and willingness at the front line and by operational management to develop new solutions. It extends its influence and learning by using secondments and joint leadership training with national and regional organisations.
- 3 KCC is value-driven, principled and strategic. It concentrates on tackling disadvantage in its communities according to need, particularly by improving access to, and skills for, employment. Values and ambitions have stayed constant through recent changes in leadership. The previous nationally-recognised Leader and Chief Executive both stood down in 2005. The new Leader has brought a highly-regarded, team-working approach to the Cabinet and a strong, altruistic focus on improving the life chances of less academic young people. He has worked with district councils to create a joint approach to localism, although knows there is more to do. He has improved the operation of overview and scrutiny but recognises that there is more room to develop. The Chief Executive has brought a passion and drive for innovation that re-echoes through the organisation, and is fostering a more corporate approach to local well-being. His leadership is recognised and appreciated internally at all levels, and his work at central government level brings useful cross-fertilisation of ideas.

- 4 The Council has a strong focus on users, finding new ways of giving better-tailored outcomes for individuals and better value. It researches and analyses Kent's needs thoroughly, and interprets and shapes national priorities confidently to meet them. It is prepared to take risks to achieve a step-change in outcomes. It is ambitious and active in facing the challenges to quality of life of a sharply-increasing population and the ever-widening London-to-Europe corridor.
- 5 The organisation is well-informed, intelligent, lively and responsive. Its performance and depth of resource is impressive. It uses delivery partnerships and procurement very well to increase its reach and capacity. It transfers knowledge diligently from commercial partners and its own councillors, many of whom have top-level business-management skills, but with no blurring of the line between governance and management. Relationships are high in trust and respect. The Council has recently been awarded level 3 in the Equalities Standard for Local Government and is aiming for Level 5 by 2010.
- 6 Good internal controls are an effective counter-balance to the Council's free-thinking innovation, with particular strengths in financial management. The Council achieves good value-for-money and is particularly effective at increasing its financial capacity by attracting funding and using its assets astutely. Performance management is solid, but the Council knows there is room for improvement and is taking appropriate action.
- 7 The Council achieves very well in priority areas, including social care, economic development, improving education and skills-development, increasing public transport use and promoting exercise. It is open to new ideas and active in trying them out, for example in developing Kent TV as a community resource and to web-cast Council meetings. It maintains impetus and uses innovation to achieve good value-for-money while maintaining service quality. Although the Council is performing well against the basket of performance indicators used for Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA), in the indicators used for Corporate Assessment it is below average for county councils. The Council and its partners are at an early stage in showing improved outcomes in some important shared priorities - such as tackling high levels of health inequality, reducing the carbon footprint of services, and developing a planned approach to sharply-increasing numbers of healthy older people - but are taking action on all of these.
- 8 The Council's capacity to deliver its ambitions would be stronger if it adopted a more inclusive, listening approach - particularly with local partners and, internally, with opposition parties. This is needed for the full development of localism and of inclusive decision-making that reflects fully the needs of all communities. Although KCC's strengths are widely-appreciated, there is some alienation at what is perceived by some to be an over-dominant style with some local partners that does not take enough time to listen and build consensus. KCC's branding is active and strong, but this can be misconstrued as an over-inclination to take credit for partnership work. Opposition councillors have fewer opportunities for their views to be heard at a formative stage of policy than is usual. The Council can be unproductively sensitive to external criticism. By changing these aspects of its style, the Council could be even more effective.

Areas for improvement

- 9 Further progress in delivering excellent, integrated, well-targeted services for local people would be strengthened by a more inclusive and listening approach. To achieve this, the Council should tackle the following areas for improvement.
 - The Council should be more sensitive to the perceptions of some partners about aspects of its style. With voluntary and community organisations the Council needs to tell less and listen more. It also needs to be more generous to other partners in its external communications.
 - In the Council's membership, better-supported and earlier engagement of opposition and backbench councillors in decision-making and performance monitoring is needed, to build trust and openness and to ensure the views of all communities are fully heard before decisions are made.
- 10 Within the organisation corporately, and the Council's membership, equalities practice needs to be driven harder to reach the level of the best directorates.
- 11 In addition, the Council needs, with local partners, to deliver improvements in areas of lower performance such as recycling, refuse volumes and air quality. It also needs to understand and continue to address issues raised by the latest public satisfaction measures, including with complaints-handling.

Summary of assessment scores

Headline questions	Theme	Score*
What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?	Ambition	4
	Prioritisation	4
What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?	Capacity	3
	Performance management	3
What has been achieved?	Achievement	3
Overall corporate assessment score**		4
*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

- 12 Kent is the most populous county in England, with 1.38 million people, an increase of 3 per cent since 2002. The population is ageing and is predicted to have one of the UK's highest increases in the number of people aged 85 over the next few years, together with a fall in under-18s. The county has significant and growing numbers of new arrivals, both economic migrants and asylum-seekers.
- 13 Kent is a mix of rural communities and urban areas, with no dominant centre of population but a network of 18 towns, the largest of which is Maidstone. It has the longest coastline of any English county. It is widely known for the quality of its countryside, landscape and historic building. The Thames and Medway estuaries have significant areas of post-industrial decline, though they are also ecologically important. Seaside towns have also suffered long-term economic decline.
- 14 Population growth is creating pressures. Kent contains two of the government's major growth areas, with over 120,000 new households planned over the next 20 years. Three districts - Dartford, Gravesham and Swale - are part of the Thames Gateway, and Ashford has been designated because of its fast rail connection to mainland Europe. Housing growth presents challenges for planners and causes concern for residents. Demand for affordable housing, transport infrastructure, waste management, social, recreational and educational services and water supply are all challenging, and urbanisation is increasing flood risk.
- 15 Transport is a major strategic challenge. Kent is the main link between the UK and mainland Europe, with two international rail stations, the world's busiest passenger ferry port, two growing airports, the Channel Tunnel and the newly-constructed international high-speed rail link. HGV traffic through Kent is growing at 8 per cent each year, placing a strain on infrastructure. Proximity to London results in large commuter volumes. A higher than average proportion of people live in rural areas and car ownership is above average.
- 16 Kent has a £19.3 billion service-based economy and prosperity is growing overall, with significant tourism, thriving small and medium-sized businesses and a growing base in creative industries, pharmaceuticals and bio-science. Agriculture, fruit-growing and mineral extraction remain important to the character of the county but are no longer significant employers. The former coalfield area suffers deprivation. The workforce is less well-qualified than nationally and regionally. There is polarisation of prosperity: 19 wards, largely in the east of the county and around the coast, are among the 10 per cent most deprived in England, but there is also considerable affluence, particularly in the west, closer to London.
- 17 The health of people in Kent is generally good but there is a large, 17-year gap in life expectancy between some wards. Kent is relatively safe but violent crime is becoming a bigger factor. Public perception is that crime and anti-social behaviour related to excessive alcohol is the biggest problem.

- 18** Kent has lower than average numbers of people with black and minority ethnic (BME) heritage but also a large, established Sikh community. BME groups are on average better qualified and healthier than the population as a whole with around average economic activity. Migration is high, potentially contributing to the economy, but also putting demands on education and other infrastructure and leading to possible challenges to community cohesion. There are significant numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

The Council

- 19** There are three tiers of local government in Kent: the County Council, 12 district councils and more than 300 parish and town councils. Medway, formerly part of Kent, became a unitary council in 1998.
- 20** The Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) is the Kent Partnership, set up in 2002 and chaired by KCC. It has five working groups: the Children's Trust, Safer Stronger Communities Group, Health and Wellbeing Group, Kent Economic Board and The Kent Public Service Board. Districts, additionally, have their own LSPs.
- 21** KCC has 84 councillors, (57 Conservative, 20 Labour, 6 Liberal Democrat and 1 Independent), governed by a Leader and Cabinet. The Cabinet has nine portfolios for: Corporate Support; Finance; Operations, Resources and Skills; Children, Families and Educational Achievement; Adult Social Services; Environment, Highways and Waste; Public Health; Community Services and Regeneration and Supporting Independence. Policy Overview Committees match service directorates rather than Cabinet portfolios and have chairs appointed from the ruling group. Task-and-finish cross-party Select Committees and working groups support policy-development. The Leader of the Opposition chairs the Cabinet Scrutiny Committee and there is an NHS Overview and Scrutiny Committee. There are the usual regulatory committees, an Audit Committee and a Standards Committee.
- 22** The officer structure was revised in 2006 into four service directorates headed by Managing Directors: Adult Social Services, Children, Families and Education, Communities, and Environment and Regeneration together with a Chief Executive's Department. The Council employs around 45,000 people, including school staff. The gross revenue budget for 2007/08 is £2,114 million, net £ 741.7 million. Band D Council Tax was £964.17 in 2007/08, the fifth lowest of the 20 county councils without fire services. The capital budget is £1 billion over the three years of the Medium Term Plan.

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

Ambition

- 23 The Council is performing strongly in this area. The Kent Partnership and the County Council have clear, challenging ambitions that are very well-matched to the strategic challenges facing the county. The Council is making progress with localism but this work needs a more inclusive approach.
- 24 The Community Strategy, *The Vision for Kent* (V4K), is an excellent, inspiring document that identifies strategic needs clearly. V4K was first published in 2002 and reviewed during 2005/06. Ambitions are set out under eight themes designed to tackle the strategic challenges facing the county over the next 20 years. The themes are: Economic success - Opportunities for all; Learning for everyone; Improved Health, Care and Well-Being; Environmental Excellence; Stronger and Safer Communities; Enjoying Life; Keeping Kent moving and High Quality Homes. Each theme has a set of priorities and action plans.
- 25 These themes include a targeted approach to improving access to quality education, skills and employment, and a broadly-based approach to reviving coastal towns - for example with the arts quarter in Folkestone and the Turner Contemporary in Margate. There is a strong and successful approach to public transport, to improving access to green space around the Thames Gateway and to helping old people stay independent including through new technologies.
- 26 The consultation process for both versions of V4K was extensive. In 2005 it involved over 800 people from 240 public, private, voluntary and community organisations, an online questionnaire and special youth conference. Partners have researched needs using ward-level, and increasingly postcode-level, cross-matched research data. Ambitions and plans are shared and understood across partnerships, councillors and staff and well-communicated externally.
- 27 The Partnership and the Council are highly-focused on tackling deprivation through targeted action to improve access to employment and to employment skills. They have a full understanding of the importance of cultural development to making the county attractive to high-quality employers and raise the accessibility of better local career-paths, with some good early outcomes. The Council remains committed to educational selection at 11+, but has been active over the last five years in improving the life-chances of less academic young people by federating secondary schools and driving new approaches to developing employment skills, in partnership with employers, for the 14-24 age groups.
- 28 The Council and its partners are acutely aware of the strategic opportunities and challenges of the 'Corridor to Europe' transport links that cross the county from London to Dover and the Channel Tunnel. They have adopted early, active and successful horizon-scanning and wider lobbying to ensure that benefits accrue to the people of Kent to offset the adverse impact on their environment.

- 29** The Council is unusually outward-looking for new ways of achieving better outcomes for local people, using extensive European and wider partnership projects, including with the US States of Virginia, Washington and Massachusetts, and adopting commercial approaches to customer service and contact. A high proportion of the Council's middle managers have had opportunities to see practice elsewhere, including abroad, and feel enabled and encouraged to apply that experience in suggesting better ways of doing things in their own work.
- 30** KCC is ambitious for itself and raises the ambitions of its partners. It was an early and effective advocate of greater freedoms and flexibility in the application of public funding to its area, influencing government thinking on local public service agreements and Local Area Agreements (LAAs). Partners can already point to improved quality of life for local people, including new employment, more accessible green space and better support for independent living. The Council uses its wellbeing powers broadly, for example in the new 'Gateway' retail-style public service shops and in promoting electronic individual health monitoring.
- 31** In community leadership the Council is a very effective voice for Kent, widely recognised and appreciated by partners for its sub-regional, regional, national and Europe-wide activity in promoting the interests of the county. This has brought large amounts of national and European funding to support initiatives, and successful lobbying over various transport issues. KCC was early in recognising the potential of the Olympic Games, whether in London or Paris, and had a strategy ready to be tailored, when the decision was made. The Council is felt by other local partners to be generous and principled in its lobbying support and advocacy.
- 32** The Council's external communication is effective, with exceptionally well-produced public documents, and, recently a multi-channel approach including text-messaging and its own web-based Kent TV. Key Council meetings are web-cast, achieving much higher viewing figures than public attendance. KCC is a national leader in exploring new ways to get its message across and giving community groups a powerful voice on the web, but needs to take care not to alienate or undervalue legitimate independent voices, for example the local press. KCC's strong brand image and able self-promotion can create an unintended impression that the Council is over-keen to claim credit for joint initiatives, and it needs to keep working to change this impression.
- 33** KCC has made some progress with its Going Local agenda but is aware that there is more to do. It set up councillor-led local boards in district council areas in 2006 and negotiated the Kent Commitment, an agreement between the County and District Leaders in 2007. County Councillors have a budget to use in support of local projects. In Dover the Board has evolved into smaller, neighbourhood forums that are starting to produce genuine dialogue between all three layers of local government, creating public interest and real engagement. In other areas lack of dialogue at the set-up stage and a decision that, initially, boards would be chaired by a county councillor of the ruling group have contributed to variable, but often slight, local buy-in and engagement. A further review is intended.

Prioritisation

- 34 The Council's prioritisation is strong with a focus on individual user needs. Priorities are clear, well-established and widely-understood. Community strategy priorities within V4K are clear. Succinct action plans draw out partners' specific contributions. Within that established framework the Council's priorities are clearly-articulated, well-communicated and actively incorporated into strategies and plans. Mechanisms to ensure delivery are good, and many priorities are already making a difference to quality of life in Kent.
- 35 Kent has been in the national vanguard of developing and delivering joint priorities with public sector partners. It was the first area to set up a Public Services Board and negotiate a Local Public Service Agreement (LPSA). It was a pilot for Local Area Agreements (LAAs). Its first LPSA (2001-2004), entitled *Reducing dependency, increasing employment and fulfilment* contained 12 specific targets centred on the *Supporting Independence Programme*. LPSA2 (2005-2008), *Supporting Independence – Promoting Opportunity and Wellbeing*, includes 14 targets covering children and young people, vulnerable adults, environment and health and safety. LPSAs were incorporated into the Local Area Agreement (LAA1) in 2005. Progress is well-advanced on agreeing targets for LAA2, due to start in 2008.
- 36 The Council has been, for the last ten years, agreeing, planning and delivering strategic targets in partnership and is practised at incorporating these into strategies and plans. It has published in turn *The Next Five Years* (1998-2003), *The Next Four Years* (2002-2006), and currently *Towards 2010* (2006-2010). There is continuity and consonance, and clear, up-to-date links with other strategies and plans. The Leader's focus on young people is visible in the detail of the *Towards 2010* priorities, which are increased prosperity through business growth and job creation, transformation in education, reduced traffic congestion, improved health and quality of life, quality homes in a well-managed environment, a safer Kent, and improvements in services while keeping council tax down.
- 37 The Council is robust in its decision-making. Within clear priorities its value-based approach provides a strong strategic framework for making choices and it does not get tempted into parochialism or sectional interests. It is very effective at attracting and generating money, and its strengths in financial management and planning ensure that it can resource its priorities. So far the Council has, through strenuous efforts, funded the costs of priority developments from efficiency savings (more than £90 million over five years), by attracting high levels of external funding, from asset-realisation and through partnership. It recognises that increasing financial pressures may mean painful disinvestment in valued services in future but has the robustness of decision-making to face that squarely.
- 38 KCC and its partners have a strong record of delivery. LPSA1 achieved 83 per cent of the targets set, well above the national average and attracting Performance Reward Grant (PRG) of over £21 million. LPSA2 is on course for PRG of at least £23 million. In the stakeholder survey for this assessment, Kent scored near the top of county councils for its delivery of priorities.

- 39 There are many examples of priorities being translated into action and having an impact on quality of life. These include a large apprenticeship scheme, freedom bus passes for school pupils and targeted skills development for 4,000 14-16 year-olds in partnership with employers. School attainment, attendance and participation post-16 are improving and numbers of young people not in employment, education or training are reducing. Serious road accidents have reduced sharply despite rising traffic. Bus transport is increasing, against the national trend. The Council works especially well with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. It is maintaining coverage in adult social services by innovation, partnership working and focusing on independence. The *Green Grid* of joined up countryside spaces is providing new opportunities for recreation and exercise for people in the Thames Gateway where planned housing development is high. Opportunities for exercise are increasing across the county, especially in schools.
- 40 The Council can take hard decisions to stay on track, such as its reviews of adult services involving closure of popular facilities for longer term gains for service-users. Another example is its unpopular decision to cancel the original prize-winning design for the new Turner Contemporary gallery in Margate when costs spiralled, proceeding with the concept but changing the design model.
- 41 A few targets need strengthening and focusing more strongly on community outcomes rather than activity. A minority of 2010 targets are not specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound (SMART). Examples are target 3 on town centre regeneration, target 4 to support rural business and communities to build a strong entrepreneurial culture, and target 54 on reducing avoidable admissions to hospital. Although priorities generally cascade well into team plans, there are a few gaps that the Council's current work on strengthening its quality assurance on business planning is designed to deal with.
- 42 The Council consults well with its own clients to shape its people-based services, with some excellent examples of work with less-heard groups on specific service development. Young people are enabled to contribute to broad policy. Equalities impact statements have recently been incorporated routinely into policy changes. Recent budget consultation has used a professional polling organisation to good effect. Sexual orientation is treated sympathetically.
- 43 Nonetheless there is scope for better regular engagement of some less-heard groups over broad Council priorities, for example house-bound people who are not receiving social care, and recent migrants. Some local communities and groups, including voluntary and community organisations, do not feel listened to and there is scope for local boards to make more contribution. The recent focus on electronic communications helps in engaging some people well who were less well-heard previously, for example young people and some BME groups, but the Council needs to maintain a commitment to other forms of communication to reach all sections of the community.

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 well in this area. The strength of its organisation is exceptional and capacity is increased by extensive external funding and by high-volume trading. It is unusually outward-looking, trying constantly to find better ways of doing things. Able and enthusiastic staff are skilled and motivated to deliver customer-focused services in an innovative and supportive environment. Internal controls are effective and value for money is high. Councillors are of high calibre and the internal culture is one of mutual respect. Overview and scrutiny are improving but pre-decision scrutiny is underdeveloped and not independent enough of the executive. The approach to equalities and diversity is improving but the Council knows there is more to do. Extensive delivery partnerships continue to develop well, but some aspects of relationships with district councils and voluntary organisations need improvement.
- 45 Political leadership is strong, setting a principled and altruistic tone. The Cabinet is an effective team. Roles and responsibilities are clear and councillors are high calibre and understand their strategic role. Ethical standards are high and decision-making processes are clear and well-ordered. Managerial leadership is aimed at transforming the organisation to promote a culture of innovation, challenge and risk taking with a focus on service-users. This is successful, with the Chief Executive's emphasis on fresh thinking about service-users' experience re-echoing through the views of managerial and staff groups.
- 46 Internal communication is effective, with well-developed team-briefings coupled with a multi-channel approach that includes newsletters and emailed briefings. Staff consider the Chief Executive and senior officers to be accessible. For example, the Chief Executive is reported to answer emails from individual staff members reliably, fully and promptly. Written communications, including policy documents that in many councils are dry and bureaucratic, are excellently-produced and refreshing to read in plain English. However, document control could sometimes be improved.
- 47 Council staff are highly skilled and equipped to deliver high quality services. There is a culture of continuous improvement, an atmosphere of openness and honesty, high job satisfaction and a committed workforce. Training and development is very good and a high quality leadership development programme ensures continuing development. Joint top-level leadership training, supported by two business schools, has recently started with other public sector and business partners. Human Resources policies and strategies are good. The whole council has Investors in People accreditation.

- 48 Financial management is excellent. The Council received one of the best Use of Resources assessments nationally, with the maximum score overall and in four out of the five individual themes. It offers good value for money. Risk is managed effectively - for example in provisions for exit strategies from externally-funded projects. The Council has for some time been expert at augmenting its financial capacity through astute asset and service-management. It is extremely successful at attracting funding and making the best use of the money it attracts. For example only half of the £100 million budget in the Communities Directorate is funded directly, the rest being supported by income.
- 49 The Council uses ICT effectively throughout its activities and partnerships. Criticisms in an Audit Commission assessment in 2002 have been addressed and ICT strategy now aligns with strategic objectives and is supporting transformation in service delivery. Unit costs are low and directorate confidence in ICT is high. Managers have devolved responsibility and more flexibility to suit ICT to their business needs. ICT investments support a wide range of community benefits such as Kent Connects (a single public service network which enables partners to share information securely), Explore Kent, Cluster Web, Kent Card, Telecare and Telehealth. Kent Community Network provides schools with high speed, high capacity broadband. Customers have 24-hour access to many of the Council's services and Cabinet and key Council meetings are web-cast. Parish portals enable each of Kent's parish councils to produce their own web and email facility.
- 50 Asset management is strong. The Council works in partnership to manage its substantial assets, for example working with district councils on joint property rationalisation, using proceeds of sale effectively to fund new front line assets, and in some cases to invest and bring a return. Large capital schemes are currently planned, including a very large Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme. These are challenging, with some funding gaps being met through planned slippage. Nonetheless the size of the Council's asset base and its financial acumen mean it is well-placed to manage its way through.
- 51 Procurement is effective and continues to improve. The Council hosts the South East Centre of Excellence and is recognised and used as a national good practice exemplar. It has revised governance to give tight corporate control and produced a particularly good plain English guide for staff. It has made £42.4 million savings over the last four years, with strengthened diversity and environmental provisions. There is unusually wide and well-managed use of delivery partnerships, with over 45 per cent of non-schools spending used to procure services. The Council's very large Commercial Services arm (£350 million turnover) spreads overhead costs and improves value for money by providing functions externally to an unusual extent, including back-office functions to district councils and other public sector bodies including government departments. Delivery partners are mostly very positive about joint working, a number reporting that they feel better-engaged with KCC than with other councils.

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- 52** The Council is building the capacity of some voluntary sector partners in supporting its delivery. For example, libraries use 600 local volunteers and the Council supports volunteer bureaux to improve their media skills. In adult social care the Council is active in recruiting young volunteers with a view to future recruitment. Delivery partnerships with this sector are growing in effectiveness, but as previously mentioned, the Council does not fully exploit opportunities for harnessing their input through listening and engagement.
- 53** Workforce planning is developing internally but is at an early stage. The Council has good data and is adopting a more strategic approach. It is commissioning joint workforce planning with its main partners to overcome skills shortages, although this is not yet in place. It is improving the diversity of its workforce, for example by recognising the ageing profile and developing graduate and mentoring programmes to attract younger workers. The number of women in senior positions is increasing. Staff networks for BME staff, disabled, LGBT and young people offer support to each other. The Council is in Stonewall's top 30 gay-friendly employers nationally and has the Two Ticks symbol as a good employer of disabled people.
- 54** The Council is better-focused on some cross-service priorities as a result of restructuring, although it is still essentially service-based. Mechanisms to ensure a more corporate approach are at an early stage of development but are starting to have an impact. There is good cross-departmental working in LAA priorities. The cross-directorate resource managers group is effective in supporting and enabling cross-directorate work. Its members report reduced departmental defensiveness and a newly collegiate approach. Greater collaboration brought success in delivering the challenging 2008/09 budget with little inter-directorate conflict. There are high-level cross-directorate boards on selected corporate development areas, although progress is variable and the Council is aware that there is further to go in some areas to achieve consistency, for example in Freedom of Information, equalities and personalisation of services.
- 55** The staff profile does not fully reflect changing demographics and there is wide variation between departments. The experience of staff members who are in a minority is mixed and is too dependant on the attitudes of individual managers and departments. Training on equalities is not compulsory for staff or councillors, although modules are included in induction and management training. At the time of this assessment the Council was being assessed at level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government, (since confirmed), not as high as some high-performing councils, but it is, ambitiously, aiming for Level 5 by 2010.

- 56 Scrutiny is improving but there is considerable scope for a more inclusive approach. Policy Overview Committees are now normally attended by Portfolio-holders, which allows more opportunity to hold the Cabinet to account, and they have recently started to get six-monthly performance monitoring reports for their areas. Task and finish Select Committees and working groups are highly valued by councillors of all parties and have made important contributions to policy. But currently Overview is not independent enough of the Executive to be fully-effective in performing a wider scrutiny of policy development and ensuring this work has impact. The constitution is operated to clear the way for Cabinet decisions but in the process dissipates opposition input into over-used, and often ineffective, post-decision call-ins. Officers' capacity to support overview and scrutiny appears unusually small and can be a limiting factor in pre-decision debate. As a result opposition views are formulated and considered too late in the process to help the robust and inclusive development of policy and priorities.
- 57 KCC's relationships with partners are generally good and improving. The current Leader has worked hard and successfully to improve relationships with local councils at Leader level, reaching an agreement, *The Kent Commitment*, for joint working and action-planning in early 2007. There are many effective and innovative initiatives mentioned elsewhere in this report. Relationships with Medway Council have greatly improved. However relationships between KCC and District and Borough Council Chief Executives, which should be a key resource in shaping joint priorities and smoothing the path to implementation, are not as effective as they might be. KCC's innovative drive is seen, on occasion, as impatient in building joint ownership and in meeting district councils' concerns about identity and consultation. The Council needs to manage these relationships more strategically so as to promote a higher level of trust, in view of the growing importance of local partnerships and national expectations for their future delivery of big and complex issues.

Performance management

- 58 The Council is performing well in performance management. Systems are clear, well co-ordinated and well-linked to business planning. A comprehensive appraisal system is in place for officers. Performance management is established and effective in most established partnerships, although is less developed in others. The Council uses information to drive improvement and has turned round some under-performing areas. It uses external review actively. There is scope for improvement, albeit from a solid base, in target-setting, business planning, service standards and complaints-handling, and the Council is working in these areas. It needs to be more active in giving backbench members ready access to relevant, up-to-date performance information in summary form.
- 59 There is a clear, accessible performance management system in place, with effective performance monitoring arrangements at cabinet, corporate management and directorate levels. Senior officers and councillors use reporting systems effectively to identify under-performance. Portfolio-holders and directors meet frequently to discuss and account for service performance. Most staff understand and use their departmental systems well.

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

- 60** Reporting is generally appropriate, with monthly performance monitoring at directorate level and quarterly at Chief Officers' Group and Cabinet. Performance against a selected group of national performance indicators (PIs) is included on an exception basis through a well-established *Staying Excellent* reporting process to ensure a targeted focus on key areas for improvement.
- 61** The Council uses performance management systems effectively to drive improvement. Monitoring leads to intervention to correct underperformance, for example for Youth Offending Service referral times to Child and Adolescent Mental Health, where the rate of meeting the target timescale rose from 20 per cent of cases in 2005 to all cases by 2007. Similarly, there has been a reduction in the average number of days to complete streetlight repairs following a sustained focus. For road accidents, a key LPSA target, a disappointing performance in autumn 2007 prompted an active publicity campaign, resulting in better than average figures for the past three months.
- 62** The Council has a well-established, reliable annual appraisal process. Appraisals are backed by good management processes, and staff and managers feel they have free upward access. Staff and managers understand the culture they are expected to model and the outcomes expected of them. They feel empowered to deliver services flexibly to improve outcomes, and to suggest improvements. Staff development is well-targeted on need and takes many forms in addition to conventional training. Councillors and Cabinet members have to produce an annual report about their activity, and Cabinet Members are appraised by the Leader. The Council is aware that evaluation of development needs strengthening and is taking steps to do so.
- 63** There is a mix of established and developing performance management and monitoring arrangements with key partners. Clear performance management systems are in place for established partnerships, including the community safety partnership and the Kent Agreement, and there are developing arrangements for other partnerships such as the children and young people's partnership. The Cabinet receives quarterly performance information on LAA and *Towards 2010* targets that is shared between the partners and is used effectively, for example to monitor LAA1 and develop the new LAA2 agreement. However, other partnerships have yet to develop effective joint systems. The quality of the information shared between partners is variable but the Council is working actively with partners to improve it.
- 64** The Council is active in seeking out innovative ideas and using them to learn and improve. There are a number of examples where it has visited councils and other organisations within the UK and internationally to seek out notable practice. For example, it developed the family group conferencing service based on learning from New Zealand via Hampshire CC. Telehealth and Kent TV resulted from seeing innovative practice in the USA. It uses secondments from other organisations well, for example a climate change expert from DEFRA is helping to reduce its carbon footprint. The Council is also developing frameworks and structures internally to share learning, for example the senior managers' cross-directorate forums. It uses external peer evaluation extensively to drive improvement.

- 65** Although the links between decisions and actions are generally solid and well-established, the Council is aware that there is scope for improvement. For example it is refining its business plans to ensure consistency and to meet the corporate standard, with revised service planning guidance and quality assurance processes for 2008/09. The carry-through of priorities into business and delivery plans, although generally good, has some gaps and needs better quality-checking. Targets tend to be over-focused on achieving planned activity rather than on outcomes for local people, and are not always SMART. A minority of delivery plans lack timescales and milestones for some of their activities.
- 66** The Council's use of and response to complaints as a resource to drive improved services is being further developed, but currently - although statutory requirements are met - directorates have inconsistent approaches, and mechanisms for monitoring and using complaints are underdeveloped. This inconsistency is reinforced by the mixed quality and availability of service standards. Public satisfaction with complaints-handling is in the worst 25 per cent compared with other councils.
- 67** In its relationships with regulators the Council is unexpectedly defensive for an organisation of such high repute. This discourages early advice and means that stronger messages about areas for improvement are not always heard clearly and acted upon quickly, because the immediate response is often to expend much energy, unproductively, on rebuttal.
- 68** Performance monitoring by the wider body of councillors is under-developed although improving. Presentation of performance monitoring information to councillors outside the Cabinet, while it has increased recently, remains unusually limited. Policy Overview Committees have in recent months taken on a six-monthly performance monitoring role, although their approach to and rigour in this is, so far, inconsistent. This is the only formal mechanism for presenting backbenchers with in-year performance information. There is no electronic 'dashboard' or regular reports for backbench and senior opposition members to monitor areas of individual interest, or performance more generally. The ability of backbench and opposition councillors to be alerted at an early stage to areas meriting scrutiny and challenge is therefore hampered. The new IT system will put the Council in a position to remedy this.

What has been achieved?

- 69 KCC is performing well in achieving with partners its priorities for local people. The Council was in the forefront of developing the national-local shared priorities, and is confident in shaping national priorities to local need and taking advantage of opportunities for pilot funding. Leadership for and commitment to shared priorities and major strategic challenges is strong, and mechanisms to ensure delivery are good. There is notable practice, but some work is at too early a stage to show results. The Council achieves generally good improvement in priority areas, However, performance is weak in a few service areas and at a very early stage in some of the shared priorities.
- 70 With its partners the Council is tackling some major strategic challenges, including improving educational participation and performance, making major population growth sustainable, targeting improvements in local skills and jobs, tackling post-industrial and seaside town decline, supporting healthy living, mitigating the effects and maximising the opportunities of the London to Europe corridor. There is notable practice in a number of these areas. Work on other shared priorities is in hand, but at too early a stage to show results, including on health inequalities, the over-50 agenda and climate change.
- 71 The Council and its partners are delivering improvements in priority areas on the ground. Achievements include a significant reduction in road accidents, reduced crime and anti-social behaviour, traffic congestion, teenage conceptions and impact of drug misuse, and improvements in educational participation and achievement, employment and public transport use. Regeneration is starting to transform coastal towns. These achievements are improving life-chances and quality of life in the County.
- 72 Focus on the user experience is exceptional and the Council and its partners are in the forefront of experimental approaches to personalising services. These include developing retail-type shop-fronts for public sector services provided by County, District, NHS and voluntary-sector which promise to help contain costs as well as provide better, more-integrated access for local people. The Council is a national leader on large-scale trialling of assistive technology, including health monitoring, to help maintain people's independence.
- 73 The Council's people-based services do excellent work in engaging less-heard groups and service-users with disabilities in service design, but some council services have more to do in engaging diverse groups to help shape them.
- 74 Despite strong focus on, and notable practice in, priority areas, and good value-for-money overall, Kent's performance in some areas is less strong, for example in recycling and volume of waste, and below-target air quality. Under the standard methodology now used for the public satisfaction figures, which have removed the option for direct interviewing, KCC's results have moved from the best, with an improving trend, to the worst quarter of councils, as they have for satisfaction with complaints-handling. Nonetheless surveys performed on behalf of the Council for individual services continue to show high levels of satisfaction.

Sustainable communities and transport

- 75 The Council is effective in stimulating employment growth in Kent. It maintains a strategic overview of employment issues, engaging effectively with regional agencies and districts to ensure that sufficient land is available for development. It is helping to open up new employment sites, including by using its own land, and providing infrastructure for economic development and regeneration. The inward investment partnership, Locate in Kent, secures about 2,500 jobs per year in sectors with good prospects for further growth. KCC supports many projects to help excluded or vulnerable residents into work, particularly in areas of disadvantage. It supports the rural economy through its draft *Rural Delivery Framework* and tourism initiatives.
- 76 The Council engages well with partners in the regeneration of north and east Kent. It promotes broadly based approaches through local partnerships and works across services. It targets specific employment issues in vulnerable wards through its *Supporting Independence Programme*, and young people's skills development in areas where youth disaffection is high. It uses its own procurement to support the local economy, also procuring goods and services at competitive rates for local firms that supply it with services.
- 77 However, significant disparities remain. Although employment is growing faster in Kent than the south east as a whole, unemployment remains higher and skills levels and earnings lower. The proportion of employment in the growing 'knowledge' economies is also lower. The earnings gap is widening slightly. Three quarters of the jobs attracted through Locate in Kent over the last four years went to west Kent and the Thames Gateway, though the level of new investment in East Kent has improved recently.
- 78 KCC has shown leadership on housing development through the regional planning process and the Local Area Agreement. Housing completions are meeting regional plan requirements, though affordable housing performance has been poor in some districts. The Council is an active partner in the national housing growth areas at Ashford and Thames Gateway. It is working with east Kent districts on an empty homes initiative, committing staff resources and capital funding to support a loan scheme for property refurbishment. In 2006/07 the partnership brought 170 empty properties into use and is on track to exceed its LPSA2 target of 372. It also supports housing projects for vulnerable households.
- 79 The Council has put infrastructure in place to improve waste management and made budget provision for further investment, but there are risks for the next decade. A major waste-to-energy plant and materials recycling facility is currently being commissioned at Allington and an in-vessel composting facility is under construction in west Kent. These will increase overall recycling levels by about nine per cent and reduce the demand for landfill. But to avoid landfill tax penalties the Council needs to introduce further new waste facilities by 2014. Strategic decisions are urgent but the Waste Development Framework has been delayed. As a result, sensitive planning decisions for waste facilities may have to be taken before its adoption with the risk that they will not be guided strategically, or not be agreed and penalties incurred.

- 80 The Kent Waste Partnership (KWP) has been slow in developing effective local collection schemes that integrate with disposal arrangements to produce high levels of recycling. Recycling rates across the county are improving but are low compared with others and there is disparity between collection authorities in practice and performance. KWP is drafting a new action plan and memorandum of understanding, but it is too early to say how effective these will be. Partners are stemming waste growth using a variety of education programmes across the County. Waste levels are above average compared to other counties but have stabilised after a long period of increase.
- 81 Progress on environmental protection and enhancement is mixed. The Council supports a number of successful countryside management projects that encourage volunteering and promote sustainable tourism. It has opened a major new visitor centre at Shorne Country Park, with interpretation and conference facilities in an innovative, sustainable building. It has invested in Kent rural footpaths and bridleways and supported them with guidebooks for walkers, cyclists and riders, self guided walks and an Explore Kent website. However some biodiversity indicators are deteriorating, and air pollution is off-target.
- 82 The Council is helping to encourage high standards of design in new development through Kent Design, a partnership of planning authorities and developers. Sixty per cent of new KCC buildings are currently built to BREEAM Standard 'very good', and the Council co-sponsors the *Kent Design Guide* and *Kent Design Awards* to promote good sustainable design.
- 83 The Council is making good progress against most of its transport priorities. Its Local Transport Plan is assessed as excellent, and delivery as good. The number of people killed or seriously injured on its roads has reduced significantly. The Council has improved the cycling network, with a 53 per cent increase in cycle trips, and has increased the number of children walking to school. It has supported improvements in public transport, securing an impressive 19 per cent increase in bus use through a number of measures. Sophisticated traffic management systems are reducing congestion and prioritising buses in towns. Road maintenance has been challenging, but the condition of principal roads is improving and now compares with that of the best councils. The Council has developed a new customer care culture through the Kent Highway Alliance and this is helping it to improve its speed of response.

- 84** The Council is showing a new awareness about improving its own sustainability, but progress is not consistent across the organisation and senior managers' awareness is variable. The Council has not established and is not monitoring its total carbon footprint. However policy targets for 2010 have been set out and a £1.5 million internal energy and water investment fund established. There has been some success with CO2 and small-to-medium scale water and energy savings. The eco-schools programme is helping many schools to improve environmental performance and awareness by competing for national flag awards. The Council has not, however, evaluated the overall impact of the programme on the sustainability of the service. The Council is procuring goods and services in a more sustainable way. It is supplying bio-diesel to its extensive vehicle fleet, installing biomass boilers and developing a supply chain to secure fuel from local coppiced woodland. But it does not have a comprehensive view of its baseline performance and cannot show the full, cumulative effect of these initiatives.

Safer and stronger communities

- 85** The Council is working well with its partners to improve community safety. Levels of overall crime are reducing, especially vehicle crime and burglaries. While violent crime is reducing it remains higher than average, and a particular challenge in East Kent. The Council and its partners have a good understanding about this and reducing violent crime is a target in the emerging LAA2. The Council provides good leadership on community safety and is innovative and creative but backbench councillors and opposition leaders are not kept as well-informed as they need to be to be fully-engaged. The Council is improving its approach to domestic violence, trialling special courts and setting up a domestic abuse forum, albeit later than many.
- 86** The Youth Offending Service has contributed to a year-on-year fall in first time entrants to the youth justice system and a fall in re-offending for young people. The service works well with young people who are at risk of getting involved in crime, anti social behaviour or being excluded from school.
- 87** Fear of crime is reducing as a result of effective measures to reduce anti social behaviour. A Community Warden Scheme complements neighbourhood policing and over 100 wardens cover rural communities and urban fringes. Wardens work well with local police teams and respond to a wide range of community concerns. The HandyVan and HomeSafe schemes help to make elderly and vulnerable people feel safer at home and have made safety checks and security installations in the homes of 15,000 older and vulnerable people. However, the anti-social behaviour strategy is in draft and is not yet driving a multi-agency approach.

- 88 The Council is working to reduce drug and alcohol misuse. It participates in the local delivery of the National Drug Strategy through its membership of Kent Drug and Alcohol Action Team (KDAAT). The performance of KDAAT does not currently compare well nationally but the Council has invested to increase its capacity. New leadership, a greater focus on user involvement, improved performance monitoring systems and more collaborative working arrangements have put KDAAT in a good position to improve.
- 89 The Council understands how fear of crime is driven by environmental factors as well as by crime and anti social behaviour. Clear guidance is available to staff about how to mainstream community safety into all council services. Operation Cubitt is an effective multi-agency approach to deal more effectively with abandoned cars and untaxed vehicles. The Clean Kent Campaign focuses on reducing fly-tipping, littering and graffiti and has contributed to a 20 per cent increase in the public perception that Kent is clean. These projects are contributing to a better environment and quality of life for local communities.
- 90 The Council works effectively with other agencies to reduce accidents. Road accidents are reducing significantly and are on track to meet the national target of a 40 per cent fall in the number of people killed or seriously injured well before the 2010 deadline. Multi-agency campaigns target drink driving, mobile phone use, speeding and non-use of seat belts. A combination of education, publicity, training and enforcement has been successful. Projects such as Operation Cubitt and Clean Kent are reducing deliberate fires, fire deaths and casualties.
- 91 Emergency planning arrangements are fit for purpose. Multi-agency arrangements are in place, with KCC providing support to District Councils. The Local Resilience Forum co-ordinates information- and resource-sharing effectively. Arrangements were put to the test in the fuel crisis in 2000, the Foot and Mouth Disease outbreaks in 2001 and 2007, flooding in 2000 and the east Kent earthquake of 2007, and have worked well. Evaluation and review is systematic.
- 92 The Council works well in improving community cohesion in local areas, for example the Positive Futures project with Charlton Athletic Football Club and the multi-agency Gypsy and Travellers Forum. Rural wardens strengthen community cohesion and there is good work to support asylum seekers and economic migrants. However, the Council does not have an overarching strategic approach to cohesion and this is resulting in a lack of co-ordination and some gaps, for example the lack of a county-wide approach to promoting the contribution of migrants and countering myths.

Healthier communities

- 93 KCC and its partners understand health inequalities well but progress in meeting them is not yet delivering measurable results. Life expectancy overall is higher than average but between the best and worst wards there is an unusually high 17 years difference. Thanet has the lowest life expectancy, well below the national average.

- 94 Joint work with the NHS on health inequalities has until recently been slow to develop, but in 2006 the Council and the Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) jointly appointed a Director of Public Health. The resulting public health strategy was agreed by partners in 2007 and has clear, appropriate priorities. Local action plans are now being developed in each district, supported by the 'Choosing Health' budget.
- 95 Councillors are committed to addressing health inequalities and KCC has a Cabinet member for Public Health. The Council is leading on a public health observatory, to promote health and reduce inequality through sub-ward-level public health intelligence and knowledge management. Health scrutiny is well developed, for example commissioning a wide-ranging report into physical activity and obesity that is contributing to a strategy across PCTs, District Councils, the private leisure industry and the voluntary sector.
- 96 The Council is vigorous in promoting healthy lifestyles for all age-groups. It has for some years been developing with partners the 'Green Grid' near the Thames Gateway, where recreational space is short, to provide a network of woods, heath-land and country park, connected by foot, cycle and bridle paths. Walking, cycling and riding routes across the county are well-promoted. East Kent Health Walks for people diagnosed as needing physical activity attract around 550 participants weekly. 'Activmobs' provides the infrastructure to help local people organise their own group physical activity. The Council promotes healthy eating and exercise to staff and offers health checks to non-schools staff.
- 97 The number of school pupils taking part in high-quality sport and physical exercise for at least two hours a week has climbed from 64 per cent in 2005 to 84 per cent in 2007 as a result of Big Lottery Fund projects for activities on school sites outside hours. In 2006/07, KCC secured £4 million of external funding, trained 1,300 teachers, coaches and volunteers, and supported 138 community sports events and programmes. A new, biennial Kent-wide School Games starts in 2008. The Healthy Schools initiative in partnership with the PCTs and KDAAT has been exceptionally successful, focusing first on schools in the most deprived areas. The Kent Agreement target of 50 per cent of schools was reached in July 2006 and 90 per cent are now involved, with 100 per cent in Thanet. There are two European-funded projects for joint work between children in Kent and North France on aspects of healthy living. Teenage pregnancies have reduced, although so far by less than target.
- 98 The 'Gateway' joint shop-front initiative brings health prevention closer to people's daily lives, although this is still at an early stage. The Ashford Gateway, the first to open in 2007, found a health screening event with a local pharmacy so popular that ongoing free checks for diabetes, blood pressure and *Chlamydia* infection are planned. However, there is limited focus within the Council on working with more vulnerable minority ethnic communities, for example adult asylum seekers and migrant workers, to identify needs and promote understanding of how to access health and support services.

Older people

- 99 Kent is at a very early stage in developing a strategic approach to engaging with and providing for its increasing numbers of healthy, independent people over 50. It has recognised this gap and has appointed an older people's champion recently, but this is not a Cabinet role and routes to influence mainstream policy are not yet established. There are many impressive individual services and projects that promote a healthy and productive lifestyle, some described in sections above and others offered within cultural, arts and education services. But they are not pulled together into a targeted offering for older people.
- 100 Adult social care services are good, judged three-star by the Commission for Social Care Inspection. The Council is now one of few councils that still sets eligibility criteria at moderate, focusing its efforts on maintaining independence. It provides and commissions effective care to help people to return to their homes from hospital, with several impressive new partnership projects. It works effectively in partnership with the Department for Work and Pensions to promote benefit take-up. Its guidelines on working with older people from BME backgrounds have been recognised by the Department of Health (DoH) as a good practice exemplar.
- 101 There are notable developments. The Council is rolling out proposals to allow people over the next ten years to personalise their care through a responsive market place. The proposals are to meet need earlier by giving better information about community-based services; to make access easier by being more local; to extend self assessment so that people with less complex needs have no-fuss access to basic aids; to develop online assessment for more complex needs; and to provide brokering services that will help people procure their own services and develop a market place that makes real choice possible.
- 102 Kent has actively promoted a Whole System Demonstrator scheme to support older people, and is one of three areas in the country to pilot it. The DoH has awarded £5.1 million to make assistive technologies available to 1,000 people in five Kent areas. Electronic health and care monitoring will be a major part of the project, and social and health services will work together closely. If successful, tele-health is expected to be mainstreamed through health and tele-care through social care. Early pilot work suggests these technologies may bring significant help to vulnerable people living at home, reducing home-visits, visits to the doctor, hospital admissions and residential care as well as giving reassurance.
- 103 Until 2006 the Council was lagging in its use of direct payments but has now increased them to expected levels. It has developed the Kent Card, in partnership with a high street bank. Direct payments are credited to the card for recipients to buy their own home care support. This reduces administration, but has had a slow take-up as most providers are not set up for card payments. Nonetheless it has potential, particularly if extended to other types of assistance, to give more choice and control to service users.

Children and young people

- 104 Outcomes for children and young people in Kent are generally good and there is outstanding potential to improve.
- 105 Children and young people enjoy and achieve in education. Looked after children have closed the gap with their peers at GCSE achievement. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive a particularly good service in identifying their educational needs and then being placed to meet them. Children and young people are safe. They are generally helped well to make a positive contribution. The Youth Service plays a very significant role and many young people make an excellent contribution to civic life and local politics as a result. The Council contributes well to the ability of children and young people to achieve economic well-being.
- 106 Services are changing, to give more priority to prevention. The Kent Children's Trust (County Board) and four local 'pathfinder' trusts have agreed new structures and working practices to deliver better assessments of need and more coordinated services. The *Kent Children and Young People's Plan* identifies clear targets with realistic identification of the resources needed. The ambitions and priorities of the Council are based on extensive research, analysis and consultation. Weaknesses are prioritised and strategies put in place to improve.
- 107 The Council and its partners have successfully focused on under-achieving and vulnerable groups and have narrowed the participation and attainment gaps at ages 16 and 19. Participation in education and training post-16 is now good, having risen every year from 2004 to 2007. The variation between the highest and lowest areas within the county is low, noticeably so given very different levels of deprivation. There have been improvements at both level 2 and 3 as a result of clear strategic objectives, strong local planning structures and good, local and flexible implementation plans as part of the 14-19 strategy.
- 108 The Council and its partners have very good and wide-ranging safeguarding arrangements in place. Preventative work is effective and fewer children are being referred for social care. The large majority of those that are referred receive good services following good, timely assessments. Children on the child protection register are case-managed well, with council services operating very effectively in a planned way with partners. Quality assurance arrangements are strong and ensure that good outcomes are achieved wherever possible.
- 109 Looked after children are a priority for the Council. There has been significant reduction in the need for care services through good preventative interventions, and effective work in placing children who cannot return home with extended family and friends or adoptive families. Excellent foster carers, including specially trained carers, receive good support and offer increasingly stable placements.

- 110** Children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are being well safeguarded, benefiting from good quality early years education, day care services, and schooling. Children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are increasingly involved in planning and reviewing services, and transition planning is good. Children and young people are helped to make the necessary changes at key stages in their lives. However, some parents described difficulties in obtaining information about, and access to, specialist provision.
- 111** The Council works closely with partners to improve health, particularly by promoting healthy lifestyles. Teenage conception is lower than elsewhere in the country but local variation and a modest rate of reduction mean that it needs to stay as a priority. The 2010 target of a 50 per cent reduction against the 1998 figure remains challenging, not helped by insufficient IT capacity to monitor progress. The Council's approach with partners to wider sex and relationship education and sexual health provision shows early evidence of encouraging outcomes. Young people are very positive about what is available to them.
- 112** The capacity to improve is outstanding. The quality of service management and leadership are very strong and partnership working is very effective. There is political support and strong evidence of ability to deliver significant 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;
 - updated performance indicators and performance data;
 - a comparative review of the Council's website;
 - a survey of local partner and stakeholder organisations undertaken in November 2007 that received a 55 per cent response rate (78 responses); and
 - interviews and meetings attended.
- 3 The assessment for Kent County 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.