

Comprehensive Performance Assessment

Wear Valley District Council

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Introduction

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

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

- Ambition
- Prioritisation

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

- Capacity
- Performance management

What has been achieved?

- Achievement and Improvement

Executive summary

- 3 The Council's previous performance was judged as 'fair' in 2004. It is now performing strongly. Together with its partners, the Council has an ambitious but achievable agenda which is based on good consultation and analysis. There is a firm resolve to improve the quality of life for local people and develop self-confident and motivated communities. It is working hard to achieve this through its activities to improve health, skills levels, job opportunities, housing, the environment and community safety and cohesion.
- 4 The Council's priorities are based on a well-developed understanding of local needs in most areas and are the basis for the focus of the Council's actions. This focus has in turn resulted in increased investment in priority areas. There are a number of highly ambitious plans to regenerate the town centres and develop the tourism activity in the dales.
- 5 Lead councillors and officers provide highly effective strategic and community leadership and are respected by partners who work closely together to shape and deliver long-term ambitions for the district. They reflect the local area, its challenges and opportunities. Delivery is supported by good systems, a robust strategic framework and excellent working relationships.
- 6 The Council has matured since the last Corporate Assessment and a significant change in culture and working practices has resulted in a modern and open environment where councillors and officers work well together and morale is high. The Council has a good financial standing that has enabled it to invest in priority areas and sustain its capacity to deliver them over the next 12 months. There are clear arrangements in place to assess and review service performance. Partners, staff and councillors are clear about their roles and responsibilities and understand how they can contribute to improving services for local people. The Council is self aware and is open to external review and challenge. Equalities and diversity is an area where the Council has been slow to improve but has invested recently in additional staff and training to meet its target of achieving level 2 of the Local Government Equality Standard by July 2008.
- 7 The Council is making good progress in achieving its ambitions for the area and is narrowing the gap between local performance and national averages in key areas such as employment and health. Performance indicators show that there is a good track record of improvement. Physical and economic regeneration is evident across the district resulting in improvements to the most deprived areas and town centres, and in the areas of housing, business, training, jobs and leisure opportunities. Neighbourhood renewal activity is building stronger communities and there have been some good examples of success in reducing crime and anti-social behaviour. However there are still some significant challenges including high levels of serious crime, alcohol abuse and although levels of worklessness and health outcomes are improving it will take some considerable time before some activities will result in demonstrable outcomes.

Areas for improvement

- 8 The Council has undertaken some of the work required to make sure its services are inclusive but a lack of a strategic approach to equalities and diversity has meant that it has not yet reached level 2 of the Equalities Standard for Local Government. This creates a risk that the needs of the district's diverse community are not being met in a coordinated way. The Council should build on its progress to date to ensure that a consistent approach is taken across all services. This will help the Council become more inclusive and enable consultation to become more meaningful.
- 9 The Council does not widely publicise the level of service that users can expect from individual services. It has not developed a corporate approach to analysing complaints to identify common areas for improvement and learn from feedback. The Council should address these gaps to ensure that the public are aware of the standard of service they should expect and can feedback to the Council on areas for improvement. The Council will then be able to analyse and learn from feedback in a systematic way to support service improvements.

Summary of assessment scores

Headline questions	Theme	Score*	Weighted score
What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?	Ambition	4	8
	Prioritisation	3	6
What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?	Capacity	3	6
	Performance management	3	6
What has been achieved?	Achievement and Improvement	3	21
weighted score			47
CPA category			Excellent
*Key to scores			
1 – below minimum requirements – inadequate performance			
2 – at only minimum requirements – adequate performance			
3 – consistently above minimum requirements – performing well			
4 – well above minimum requirements – performing strongly			

**Banding thresholds for determining CPA category

Category	Required score
Excellent	45-60
Good	36-44
Fair	28-35
Weak	21-27
Poor	20 or less

Context

The locality

- 10 Wear Valley District Council is one of seven district councils in County Durham, in the north-east of England. Based on the upper valley of the river Wear it spans 30 miles from east to west. It is located in the western side of the county and is bordered by four Durham districts (Durham City, Sedgefield, Derwentside and Teesdale), Tynedale in Northumberland and Eden in Cumbria. The towns of Crook and Bishop Auckland are close to the main regional communications networks but most of the rural west of the district is remote and fairly inaccessible.
- 11 The district has a population estimated at 62,300, living within 30,000 households. This represents a small and recent increase in population following a period of steady decline from 64,000 in the 1980s. Most of the population lives in the towns of Bishop Auckland, Crook and Willington in the east of the district. The proportion of older people in the population is increasing. The mid-year population estimates for 2006 showed that 42.7 per cent of the population were aged over 50 compared to 33.7 per cent in England as a whole. The area has a low black and minority ethnic (BME) population (0.8 per cent) and there are no prominent BME communities.
- 12 The district is a mix of urban and rural areas. Extractive industries have been present in much of the district at various times, but the western part in particular has some beautiful scenery and is part of the North Pennines Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) which has Geopark¹ status. This part of the district also features over 20 conservation areas and biodiversity sites.
- 13 The district, like the rest of the County has been affected by economic restructuring and has found it difficult to diversify. The closure of coal mines and more latterly manufacturing and extractive industry losses have impacted on employment patterns. Only 12 per cent of jobs remain in the manufacturing sector. Public administration, education and health employment accounts for 35 per cent of all jobs. Tourism is of increasing importance, boosting the economy by £70 million and providing 27 per cent of jobs within distribution, hotels and restaurants. Economic inactivity rates are high at 24 per cent as is unemployment at 6.6 per cent.

¹ A European Geopark is a territory, which includes a particular geological heritage and a sustainable territorial development strategy supported by a European program to promote development.

- 14 Levels of deprivation are high but reducing. In 2007 Wear Valley was ranked as the 33rd most deprived out of 354 districts in the country compared to 24th in 2003. Areas remain where residents suffer from multiple deprivation and inequality in several aspects of their lives. Over 25 per cent of localities are in the 10 per cent most deprived. These localities are characterised by poor housing, high unemployment and worklessness, low expectations linked to low levels of attainment and skills, and poor health. Over 50 per cent of those claiming benefit do so because of ill-health. Life expectancy for both men and women is below national averages but improving. Issues mainly relate to poor cardio-vascular health, respiratory diseases, asthma and arthritis. Nearly half of all households have one or more occupants with a limiting long term illness. Over three quarters of homes in the district are owner occupied and 20 per cent are social rented.

The Council

- 15 At the time of this inspection there had been no overall political control within the Council since May 2007 with 17 Labour, 16 Liberal Democrat and 7 Independent councillors. In May 2008 a coalition was formed between the Liberal Democrat and Independent councillors giving the Liberal Democrats overall control of the Council. The Council has retained a committee system comprising policy committees for policy and strategic development, central resources, housing services, regeneration and community services. There are regulatory committees for development control, licensing, appeals and standards and, two overview and scrutiny panels. The political management group (PMG) comprises a Leader, and the five senior chairs of the main committees.
- 16 The Council's net revenue budget for 2007/08 is estimated to be £12 million, with a housing revenue account of £8.2 million and a capital programme of £6.7 million. In 2007/08, the Band D property council tax charge was £1,423 compared to an average for this type of authority of £1,348. The Council employs 550 staff with a management team comprising a Chief Executive who also acts as Strategic Director of Communities, Strategic Director of Resource Management and Strategic Director of Environment and Regeneration.
- 17 In 2006 the management of the Council's housing stock was passed to an Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO), Dale and Valley Homes. A Housing Inspection in January 2007 judged the service to be two-star. As a result Dale and Valley Homes are able to access an additional £27 million of funding over the next four years to enable it to improve housing and meet the decent homes standard.
- 18 The Council is a key partner in the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP). The partnership board sets the overall strategic direction for Wear Valley and oversees six thematic partnerships that focus on the key community strategy themes. 'Succeeding Together', the sustainable communities strategy was agreed by the LSP in 2007 and sets out the long term vision to 2030 and acts as a driver for the ambitions and plans of key partners. Local community involvement is being further developed through the recent implementation of area based management arrangements.

- 19 The Council is in transition during 2008/09 and will cease to exist on 31 March 2009. A new unitary council, Durham County Council, will be formed on 1 April 2009. The council will cover the whole of Durham county and replace Wear Valley Council, Durham County Council and all other councils in the county. Local elections to elect councillors to the new council took place on 1 May 2008.

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

Ambition

- 20 The Council is performing strongly in this area. The Council has a firm resolve to tackle the significant challenges it faces and to close the gap between local and national economic and social indicators to improve local people's opportunities and quality of life. Its very ambitious but achievable agenda is based on good consultation and analysis in most areas. The Council and its partners have sustained and developed their ambition over a number of years with a good track record of improving economic activity despite the considerable challenges within the district of industrial decline and job losses. Delivery is supported by strong community leadership, a robust strategic framework and effective partnership working.
- 21 The Council and its partners share well-understood and challenging long term ambitions to regenerate the district and improve the economic and social wellbeing and physical environment of the area. Ambitions are challenging because of the significant issues faced. These include a historically declining and aging population, an economy which has been slow to diversify, high levels of unemployment and worklessness, low skills and high deprivation. Ambitions and the long term place shaping agenda are clearly set out in the LSP's sustainable communities strategy, 'Succeeding Together', developed in 2007 looking forward to 2030. The strategy reflects what local people say is important, and acts as a driver for the ambitions and plans of key partners. The strategy is structured around six user focused themes: increasing the population, improving life long learning; increasing employment and business activity, improving the environment, reducing crime and the fear of crime and reducing health inequalities. The strategy includes a range of short and medium term targets and milestones. Examples include, increasing business birth rate with 48 new businesses between 2007 and 2008 and reducing business failure rate in the same period by 15 per cent and supporting the increase of life expectancy by a 26 per cent drop in smoking rates in manual workers by 2010. Ambitions therefore focus on the key issues that are important is developing sustainable communities and the Council and its partners are able to measure the rate of success of their actions.
- 22 The Council plays an active strategic role outside its own boundaries. Examples include work within the Association of North East Councils (ANEC), the Regional European Committee and the regional housing and planning boards. This wider work means that the Council is well placed to access external funding and support, for example a successful bid for a Growth Point in the district.

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- 23 The Council provides strong and effective community leadership. It demonstrates a clear resolve to develop self-confident and motivated communities, close the gap between the most and least deprived communities and to improve the quality of life of all residents. The Council has a strong track record of championing the regeneration of the district effectively. The Leader, Chief Executive and directors are recognised by partners to be effective in ensuring that partnership working is productive and sustainable. Partners feel that their working relationships with the Council are now characterised by trust, openness and constructive challenge.
- 24 Shared ambitions to regenerate the economy are very strong. They are supported by a wide range of stakeholders, including the local business community and underpin the Council's vision '*To become the best district council in England*' and provide excellent public services, for all communities, both in partnership and on its own. This productive relationship has enabled the development of several highly ambitious regeneration projects such as for Bishop Auckland town centre and Eastgate, a former cement works in rural Weardale. Partnerships with the other districts in the County using neighbourhood renewal funding have also led to a successful bid for Local Enterprise Growth Initiatives (LEGI) funding. £10.2 million was awarded in 2006, and partners are already achieving results in successfully supporting local economic development.
- 25 The Council's own ambitions support the sustainable communities strategy and the Local Area Agreement (LAA). They are underpinned by clear plans and strategies. Strategies contain specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timed (SMART) targets, with milestones, around increasing employment rates, especially amongst those who are economically inactive; narrowing inequalities between the most deprived parts of the district and the district as a whole; improving education and skill levels; and reducing health inequalities. Target setting is informed by good baseline information in neighbourhood profiles which bring together a wide range of statistical information at local neighbourhood levels. The profiles are regularly refreshed to ensure data is up to date and comprehensive using various sources including consultation exercises. This helps the Council and partners identify shortfalls in local provision, measure progress against targets and determine further actions in priority areas.

- 26 The Council has clear and robust processes in place to consult on and communicate its ambitions for the area and shape its services accordingly. It holds regular participative events in the community, and also consults through citizen's panels and focus groups. Examples of changes made as a result include revisions to Eastgate and Bishop Auckland master plans, improved play areas and additional street wardens. The civic newspaper 'Wear Valley Matters' and press releases keep local people informed of Council activities and are used to gain feedback. Internally, there are regular staff, manager and councillor briefings and newsletters which are easy to read and well produced. Extended management team meetings are held monthly and include second and third tier officers and leaders of all political parties. There are also channels available for staff to air views and access the Chief Executive. Senior Officers and councillors take part in 'back to the floor' initiatives which are well received by staff. Staff have the opportunity to make suggestions and ask questions and feel that their contributions are valued. A staff recognition scheme awards a monthly prize for achievement and is well publicised within and outside of the Council. These approaches mean that the Council is able to test the appropriateness of its plans, amend them where appropriate and enable local people and staff to understand what the Council is trying to achieve.

Prioritisation

- 27 The Council is performing well in this area. It has clear, high level outcome focused priorities which reflect the needs of the community and demonstrate the Council's understanding of the scale of the challenges it faces and the opportunities it has. These priorities, which are shared with partners, fit well with sub-regional, regional and national priorities and are underpinned by the necessary resources. The recently developed Transitional Plan 2008/09 sets out the most important priorities and actions required during the run up to the formation of the single unitary Council for County Durham. This enables the Council to stay focused on the most important local needs and to allocate resources appropriately.
- 28 The Council and its partners are clear about its priorities. It has a structured approach to developing these and ensuring they are based on local concerns. The Council takes its lead from the sustainable communities strategy. Its externally focused priorities are to:
- create a balanced, vibrant and growing population across the whole district;
 - enable the development of continuously improving the economic structure;
 - aim to secure new public and private investment to improve the built and natural environment;
 - design services to increase community safety and crime prevention and work closely with key partners to reduce crime;

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- improve health and wellbeing of Wear Valley residents and promote healthy lifestyles; and
- encourage the development of continuous lifelong learning in Wear Valley.

The Council also has an internally focused priority which relates to organisational excellence as a means of supporting the other six objectives. The Corporate Plan 2007/10 identifies the four key operational areas which the Council intends to improve most. These are: value for money; consultation leading to decision making; meeting the needs of diverse communities; and embedding organisational change. These clear priorities enable the Council to stay focused.

- 29 The Council has ensured that it can make the most of its resources during the transition period running up to the implementation of the new unitary Council and has recently refined its priorities. They are linked to current corporate priorities with a commitment to progress those areas which can impact most upon people's lives in terms of health and wellbeing, crime, economy, environment and lifelong learning. This demonstrates the Council's strong desire to put the needs of local people first and leave a legacy of good services on which to build in the future.
- 30 Priorities are based on a good analysis of the Council's local context and a range of consultation with local people and stakeholders. As a result the Council has a good understanding of most of its communities, particularly those that are within Neighbourhood Renewal areas. The Council has made good links with some communities at risk of exclusion such as gypsies and travellers and migrant workers and has used this intelligence to shape service provision. For example it has responded to the requests of the gypsy and traveller community and improved the facilities at Coundon as a result. The Council is leading a county wide initiative to improve knowledge of local communities through customer profiling but lacks current information about some people whose voices might otherwise not be heard including BME and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) residents. It does not analyse who is accessing its services. This means that it cannot always tell what impact it is having on specific communities or whether their needs are being heard and responded to.
- 31 There is generally broad political consensus on the main issues and priorities for the area and good cross party working has resulted in long term actions and targets staying on course. The Council has sustained its focus on priority areas despite there now being no one political party in overall control and progressing departmental restructuring following the creation of the ALMO. The Council has made some difficult decisions such as to demolish housing in low demand areas and to introduce car parking charges in Bishop Auckland. However there is one exception. A major decision made before April 2007 to implement alternate week refuse collection to increase recycling rates has not been implemented. This is due to a lack of support by opposition councillors at the time of this inspection and has resulted in slow progress being made to reach recycling targets.

- 32** Plans are action focused. The Corporate Plan and Best Value Performance Plan set out clearly how the Council links its activity to the LAA and sustainable communities strategy and are used to inform the service planning process. They identify the links to partners' responsibilities, key actions for delivering them, and challenging targets with identified outcomes in most areas. Joint strategies and plans in areas such as economic development, climate change, health improvement and community safety are developed with stakeholders and widely shared among partners. The annual cycle of review and update of service plans ensures that the financial implications of strategic and service planning are accounted for in the medium-term financial plan (MTFP). This is reviewed regularly and anticipates financial pressures and funding sources for the next three years. Strong managerial leadership and effective communication have ensured that priorities are clearly understood at all levels of the Council.
- 33** The Council has realistic and robust financial strategies which ensure that resources are targeted on priority areas. It has redirected £370,000 of efficiency savings to invest in priority areas. These include investment to engage additional street wardens and CCTV equipment, a renewable energy system at Innovation House, Bishop Auckland and improved allotment provision to support health and wellbeing objectives. It has also taken action to mainstream some effective Neighbourhood Renewal Funding (NRF) initiatives, allocating additional funding to bridge the gap until September 2008 when decisions about the allocation of Working Neighbourhoods Funding (WNF) will be made. The capital strategy includes clear and unambiguous plans relating to priorities. The bidding process ensures schemes are addressing priorities. As a result there is a detailed £24 million three-year capital programme focused on key priorities.

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

Capacity

- 34 The Council is performing well in this area. Political and managerial leadership is well respected within the Council and beyond and decision making is effective. Scrutiny is developing well with a good internal and external focus. Human resource policies are making a difference to the organisational culture which is open and positive. Training and development for both councillors and staff is good but is not consistently evaluated for effectiveness. The Council has been slow to develop a strategic approach to equalities and diversity and has not reached level 2 of the Equalities Standard for Local Government.
- 35 Relationships between members of different political groups and officers are positive. Despite the finely balanced political situation, all parties treat each other with respect and operate within an effective ethical framework. The political management group have frequent contact with directors and heads of service and are kept aware of issues affecting their services. Councillors treat officers with respect and are not distracted by operational issues. They also work well together on cross-cutting issues such as health and community safety.
- 36 The strength of managerial and political leadership has resulted in a number of benefits, both within the Council and in partnership working. Strong internal leadership from senior officers and councillors has resulted in an open and positive culture within the Council. This is particularly important during a period of change. Staff demonstrate an eagerness to provide high quality services, striving to be 'The Best' and morale is high. This leadership extends to partnerships and is resulting in an improved recognition by stakeholders of the work of the Council and its contribution to wider priorities.
- 37 Overview and Scrutiny plays an effective role in the decision making process. The chair of the committee provides good leadership and has implemented a revised structure over the past nine months which includes performance clinics and has resulted in more challenge. External assessment by consultants has shown there is a very effective work programme with scrutiny topics aligned to corporate priorities and issues of public concern. Scoping of scrutiny reviews is rigorous. There is good officer support for scrutiny panels which has enabled them to develop capacity to carry out meaningful and effective reviews which challenge the Council's performance, particularly in areas of under-performance such as a joint scrutiny review carried out with Teesdale District Council to improve removal of fly-tipping. Engagement with the public is encouraged as part of the scrutiny process. This ensures that the Council is addressing issues that are important to local people.

- 38 Risk management is effective. There is regular reporting to councillors which informs decision making and planning at a corporate level with regular review mechanisms in place. This is embedded at a service level and within the Council's partnerships. These arrangements enable the Council to assess risks and opportunities in a systematic way.
- 39 Partnership working across all sectors is strong. The Council engages well with the community and voluntary sector for example through direct involvement and investment in community development activity in neighbourhoods, health initiatives and economic activities. This supports the worklessness agenda by using volunteering and sport as a way of getting people from disadvantaged backgrounds into work and improves access to Council services.
- 40 The Council has developed close working relationships with neighbouring councils to improve its own and other councils' capacity and share skills and resources. For example, a shared services agreement with Teesdale District Council for revenues and benefits services has resulted in significant improvements in performance for Teesdale through the Council sharing its expertise and implementing new working practices such as home working. The Council also shares skills and staff for example on environmental assessments with Teesdale and Sedgefield District Councils and Homeline and domestic abuse services with Sedgefield District Council. There is good partnership working with other Durham district councils through initiatives such as the County Durham e-government partnership, Durham Coalfields Renewal Project and the sub regional Strategic Housing Market Assessment Group, which is working to determine the future direction of the housing market in County Durham.
- 41 Information, communications and technology (ICT) and e-government are used effectively to improve access to services. Through its e-government partnership, the Council has implemented a customer relationship management system which has improved resolution at first point of contact. The Council's website is accessible and regularly reviewed and updated, enabling a wide range of its services to be available to the public all day and every day. This provides improved response times and customer care. Between 2006/07 and 2007/08, the number of hits on e-services has increased from 1,979 to 2,467 and e-payments have increased from 961 to 1,419.

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- 42** The Council has been slow to develop a strategic approach to equalities and diversity. It is now addressing the gaps in its approach; a corporate strategy is in development, some equality impact assessments have been completed and a staff training programme is underway. The Council has demonstrated a clear approach to human rights emphasising both rights and responsibilities through improving the facilities at a gypsy and traveller site in Coundon alongside sustaining a strong approach to enforcement and anti-social behaviour. As a result the gypsy and traveller community is clear about the Council's approach to dealing with them. It has also taken steps to reach new communities such as Eastern European migrant workers, and responds well to requests for translations in other languages, but these activities are not encompassed in a holistic approach. The lack of a structured approach to dealing with equalities and diversity issues creates a risk that the needs of all people within the district are not being met in a coordinated and consistent way.
- 43** The Council has a good strategic approach to workforce planning, recruitment and retention and development to ensure that it has the staff capacity to deliver services during the period of transition to the new authority. For example, in order to retain key staff it has negotiated and extended notice periods and increased redundancy arrangements. It has invested well to develop staff skills through a comprehensive programme of training and development including a leadership programme. This approach supports staff, giving them access to potential development opportunities in the new authority and has improved morale in a time of uncertainty and change.
- 44** Sickness absence management is effective. Support for managers is in place to enable them to implement the sickness policy. Appropriate use is made of occupational health, counsellors and phased return to work arrangements. Return to work interviews are monitored and where these have not been comprehensive extra support is given to managers. This structured approach has enabled the Council to keep on top of sickness levels and meet its target for 2007/08 of 7.6 days.
- 45** Councillor development is good and improving. The Council has been awarded a member development charter by the Local Government Association (LGA). Several councillors have undertaken leadership training. Scrutiny members receive support and training to develop their skills. All councillors have performance and development reviews and training is available on a range of suitable topics. This has resulted in senior decision makers being more able and confident in conducting business.

- 46 The Council is in a good financial position and has the capacity to deliver its priorities. Through its medium term financial planning process it is able to understand the future financial pressures it faces and plan for these. The Council has also been successful in securing significant external funding to deliver its priorities. For example, through NRF funding it has secured £10 million over four years to deliver economic development and regeneration activity and reduce deprivation in the district. The Council is improving value for money which has been assessed as good. Structures and processes for managing savings and efficiency gains are well embedded through regular reporting and monitoring by the central resources committee and the corporate management team. There is a strong focus on efficiency; national targets for cashable efficiency targets have been exceeded by over £0.4 million, one year ahead of the government target. This is due to improved procurement, a sound budget setting and monitoring framework and clear political leadership. This has enabled the Council to allocate more resources to priority areas.

Performance management

- 47 The Council is performing well in this area. There is a positive performance management culture amongst councillors, managers and staff and a willingness to improve and become the best. The corporate centre takes an active role in ensuring there is a focus on improvement, particularly in areas that will have most impact and in interpreting performance information to identify areas of concern. This approach is underpinned by a clear performance management framework which extends to partnerships. Performance in services is improving and poor performance has been addressed. Management of performance within partnerships is good.
- 48 There is a strong culture of driving improvements in performance which has developed over recent years. Staff are committed to the Council's vision of being the best district council and demonstrate a strong performance improvement culture. Team work is performance focused with teams consistently reviewing how they work to improve procedures that lead to better service performance. Staff share a strong customer focus and show a genuine desire to provide good quality services. There are regular communications with staff on their own and other teams' performance. This encourages staff to take a pride in their achievement and introduces an element of healthy competition. As a result poor performance has been turned round for example in key services such as planning and housing.
- 49 Performance monitoring and reporting arrangements are comprehensive and effective with clear links to the delivery of strategic plans and priorities. Councillors have access to good quality monitoring information and the Performance Management Group have regular meetings with senior officers to discuss performance. The Council's performance management framework enables effective management of services through this focus. Particular attention is paid to service areas which are below average performance, such as recycling and satisfaction with parks. This enables senior managers to clearly understand what the performance issues are and how they might be addressed.

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- 50** The Council focuses well on poor performance and opportunities to improve value for money through business improvement teams and performance improvement teams. As a result it has improved poor performance in benefits, waste and recycling, planning and rent arrears. Business Improvement team members are trained and qualified in business process re-engineering. Changes implemented include streamlined processes, additional resources, training and new IT systems. This has resulted in benefits and planning performance rising to top quartile performance. Performance improvement teams are linked to the Council's efficiency programme, are focused on increasing value for money and have identified significant improvements. Team members are drawn from the service under scrutiny and other services to provide independent challenge, they also include the value for money officer. These teams have not only resulted in savings but are also intended to raise satisfaction levels. Examples include improved parks in Willington and Bishop Auckland and improved procurement within leisure services.
- 51** Resource and performance management are effectively integrated. Through the new scrutiny arrangements introduced in 2007 the Council has implemented performance clinics where service and Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI) performance, financial performance and project management are reported and monitored together. Decisions taken to address under performance take account of the financial implications of these.
- 52** Service plans have clear objectives and measurable targets and are cascaded into team and individual work-plans. Individual work plans are linked to the performance review and development system (PRADS). Interviews are carried out annually with monthly reviews. This means that all staff can identify their training needs and understand how they contribute to delivering service outcomes.
- 53** Performance management within partnerships is effective. There are good arrangements in place to monitor and manage performance within the LSP, the Crime Reduction Partnership, shared services partnerships, the e-government partnership and Dale and Valley Homes. These arrangements have resulted, for example in improved performance within housing, several aspects of crime and access to services. The performance management arrangements within the LSP are being reviewed to better address the new sustainable communities strategy and LAA structure and the Council has appointed a new LSP manager to ensure effective implementation.
- 54** Staff feedback is used to improve performance. The Council has a number of processes in place to enable staff to contribute their views. Staff in several service areas have a direct input into service design through regular team meetings. For example, benefits staff have made a significant contribution to improved performance through regular review and improvement suggestions. The Chief Executive makes it clear that staff can raise issues on any topic and responds promptly. These approaches provide regular opportunities to consult with officers from across the Council about ways to improve service delivery.

- 55** The Council is open to internal and external challenge to support its focus on priorities and improve services. There are many examples including implementing recommendations from scrutiny, the performance improvement teams, Audit Commission inspection reports of regeneration and housing and from peer reviews. The Council has also used external consultants to evaluate and challenge councillor development.
- 56** The Council is proactive in identifying good practice and learning as well as sharing its own successful practices with others. This is a key element of the shared services approach and the County-wide partnerships such as for e-government and economic development. Cross-departmental working has improved significantly and contributes to sharing learning from successful initiatives. Staff are encouraged to take part in benchmarking to compare with the best. However the Council has not yet developed a corporate approach to analysing complaints to identify common areas for improvement and learn from feedback.
- 57** Information about the Council's performance is reported clearly to the public and partners. The Council publicises its performance through the quarterly newspaper *Wear Valley Matters* and special edition supplements, in reception areas of its own offices, and on its website. There is regular performance reporting to partners through the LSP and other partnership boards. This means that local people and partners are able to have a good understanding about how well the Council is performing in its priority areas.
- 58** The Council has comprehensive service standards in most service areas. Although they are displayed on the Council's website, they are not widely publicised elsewhere. This means that the public may not be aware of the standard of service they should expect.

What has been achieved?

Achievement and improvement

- 59 The Council is performing well in this area. It has turned round areas of poor performance in priority areas such as benefits and planning, with improvement across a wide range of services. Over the past three years 60 per cent of indicators have improved compared to a national average of 54 to 56 per cent. In 2006/07, 32 per cent of national performance indicators reflected top quartile performance compared to an average of 33 per cent. Many of these are in priority areas for the Council such as housing, the environment and the economy.
- 60 The Council is making good progress in areas such as regeneration, economic development and environmental improvements and contributes well to all of the sustainable communities strategy ambitions including those for health and well being and education and lifelong learning. Major challenges remain but there are signs of improving quality of life and reducing inequalities.

Increasing the population

- 61 The Council is performing well in its work towards a slowly growing and balanced population. The population of Wear Valley had been in steady decline from 63,477 in 1981 to 61,339 in 2001. 2007 figures show that this trend has been halted and the population is now over 62,300. Levels of deprivation are high but reducing. In 2007 Wear Valley was ranked as the 33rd most deprived out of 354 districts in the country compared to 24th in 2003. In 2007 overall satisfaction with the Council was 56 per cent, an improvement of 9 per cent since 2003.
- 62 The Council has been successful in improving community capacity and cohesion. This has been achieved through good engagement and effective use of external funding to support local community initiatives. For example the Dene Valley Partnership has brought together residents in eight previously isolated settlements and enabled them to influence housing renewal and build a one-stop-shop and community centre. Similar initiatives in Tow Law and Coundon and Leeholme have resulted in improved work and training opportunities. These initiatives are empowering local people to undertake local projects which have a positive impact on their quality of life.
- 63 The Council provides good support to communities through the voluntary sector. It provides core funding for the Citizens Advice Bureau and for 2D, the umbrella support organisation, to enable it to support the wider community and voluntary sector. Providing core funding in this way provides stability for organisations enabling them to access other supplementary funding. The Council also provides direct support to a wide range of initiatives including £12,000 to a woman's refuge and £30,000 for work on mental illness to support people back to work.

- 64 The Council and partners are establishing local arrangements to improve partnership working within localities giving communities a stronger voice. It has recently formed a neighbourhood arrangements team to work across the district to implement area based management arrangements and improve community engagement at a local level. These arrangements further support community empowerment.

Improving life long learning

- 65 The Council contributes well to the priority of improving life long learning. Through partnership working with local communities it has supported adult learning opportunities. The Pathways to Employment project and the Choices programme have delivered significant programmes and opportunities. Falling from 13 per cent to below 10 per cent Wear Valley and Teesdale have exceeded the county-wide target to reduce the number of 16 to 18 year olds who are not in employment, education or training (NEETs) to 10.5 per cent. These activities have contributed to a 7 per cent reduction in the working age population with no qualifications since 2002 and an increase from 81 to 85 per cent in pupils staying on in education and training between 2004 and 2006.
- 66 The Council has also worked well to meet its objective to develop more Council employees with accredited qualifications. This has resulted in 16 modern apprentices being employed by the Council, 64 members of staff achieving NVQ level 2 qualifications and over 90 members of staff completing IT training courses. Eleven managers are currently undergoing the North East Excellent Managers course and 90 per cent of all senior councillors have completed the IDEA's Leadership Academy. These actions help staff and councillors deliver better services and provide pathways to future career progression.

Increasing employment and business activity

- 67 The Councils achievements in regenerating the area's economy are strong. Its regeneration activity has contributed to maintaining employment levels despite closures of large employers within the district and the business stock is growing. Numbers of people on incapacity benefit are reducing. The district, like the region as a whole, lags behind the rest of the country and big challenges for the district remain. However Wear Valley is narrowing the gap.
- 68 The employment rate has improved over the past two years and 75.8 per cent of the working age population of the district is economically active. At 6.6 per cent the unemployment rate is high but the gap in employment rates between Wear Valley and rest of the country as a whole has narrowed to 2.4 per cent from 10.3 per cent two years ago.
- 69 Steady progress has been made in reducing numbers of people on incapacity benefit and in receipt of Job Seekers Allowance (JSA). This has been achieved through partnership programmes such as Choices. The numbers of people aged 50 and over claiming JSA has decreased from 19.3 per cent in 2004 to 15.9 per cent in 2007, lower than the national average of 16.1 per cent.

- 70 The Council provides good support for business start ups. For example through units at Innovation House in Bishop Auckland, Low Willington and Speculative Workspace Schemes. Business start up rates compare favourably with other Durham districts but at 28 per 10,000 population in 2004 but lag behind the England average of 38 per 10,000. Other business support includes business development programmes and energy efficiency projects to reduce business energy costs. Planning performance supports economic regeneration. Performance is generally good with top quartile satisfaction. Developments on brownfield land are increasing.
- 71 The Council is making good progress on tourism initiatives and is developing events and attractions in the district to encourage more visitors and raise its profile in the sub-region to support economic regeneration. For example the number of people attracted to the annual food festival in Bishop Auckland has increased from 6,000 to 23,000 visitors in 2007, contributing to a net increase of £6 million in tourism spend in County Durham. Work with the Area Tourism Partnership and the West Durham Rural Delivery Partnership has helped the district raise awareness of the Durham Dales brand regionally and nationally. This has resulted in local businesses using the brand to promote custom.

Improving the environment

- 72 The Council is working well to improve the environment. The Bishop Auckland Urban Renaissance Master Plan is a good example of effective partnership working across a range of public, voluntary and private sector stakeholders. It won a Regional Enterprising Britain Award in 2007 for its £16 million programme of activity to restore it to a vibrant market town. The Council has prioritised the development of Bishop Auckland's town centre not only to improve the appearance and quality of life of the area but to help realise significant economic opportunities. Progress to date includes public realm enhancements including the relocation of a major food store, renovation of the Newgate Street Centre and renovation of a former church building for community use. Shop front and commercial buildings improvement grant has resulted in reduction in vacant commercial premises from 60 in 2002 to 19 in 2006.
- 73 The Council's environmental services are all improving and are effective. The percentage of land which has unacceptable levels of fly-posting and graffiti visible improved significantly from below average to top quartile performance. Street cleanliness performance is above average and satisfaction is in the best quartile. Almost the whole population of Wear Valley is served by kerbside recycling but although the rate has improved from a rate of 11 per cent in 2004/05, performance is low at 26 per cent. Despite not having introduced alternate weekly collections as planned, the Council is reducing the volume and cost of waste collected against the national trend, by encouraging people to compost and reuse their waste. Satisfaction with recycling and refuse collection is improving and is above average.

- 74 The Council is working well to limit the impact of climate change with some success. It has already exceeded the Government's target of a 30 per cent reduction in domestic carbon emissions ahead of the 2010 deadline. It has allocated grant funding of 30,000 to bolster the existing government grant distributed through the Low Carbon Buildings Programme for domestic households and is the lead partner in Energy (Eco) Village proposal (EREV) which aims to become a centre of excellence in renewable energy and related sectors.
- 75 The Council has improved parks and open spaces. It makes good use of developer contributions to improve play and community facilities in the district. These include multi-surface play areas in Tow Law; picnic tables and seats at Middlewood Green and replacement of play areas in Oakley Cross and Escomb. Despite these improvements satisfaction with parks and open spaces is comparatively low.
- 76 The Council is working well in partnership with Dales and Valley Homes to improve council homes but will not meet the government target for achieving the decent homes standard by 2010. It has consulted well with tenants and has agreed a revised target for achieving a decent homes plus standard in all of its social housing by 2012. This is as a result of working to the tenants' preferred priority of dealing with the aspects of housing in need of most work first. There are good examples of housing management improvement which is resulting in high levels of tenant satisfaction and reductions in anti-social-behaviour on estates.
- 77 Progress in private sector housing is generally good. The Council is well placed to meet its target of 70 per cent of vulnerable residents living in decent homes in the private sector by 2010. Over the past four years it has also returned 130 private sector homes to occupation or had them demolished. However the percentage of private sector homes vacant for more than six months remains in bottom quartile.

Reducing crime and the fear of crime

- 78 Performance in reducing crime is variable. Police data shows good reductions in common assault with a projection of 49 per cent reduction in March 2008 against a target of 12 per cent. Performance in reducing domestic burglaries is 15 per cent ahead of the projected reduction and reductions in theft of motor vehicles is ahead of target. However, woundings have increased with a projected increase of 224 per cent against a target reduction of 12 per cent. In part this is due to changes in crime reporting standards but significant challenges remain. Overall the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP) predicts a 6 per cent increase in British Crime Survey comparator crime against a target reduction of 15 per cent by 2008.

- 79 The Council and partners work well to address racial harassment. Although the level of incidents is very low there is a strong awareness of the issue and cases that have arisen have been dealt with appropriately. Multi-agency working is well developed. Abusive graffiti is removed on the same day and residents have noticed the prompt action taken. This approach supports the development of cohesive communities.
- 80 Overall the Council and partners approach to anti-social behaviour and nuisance is effective. Partners map 'hot spots' and resources are directed towards those areas through, for example, increased street warden patrols. The warden service has been mainstreamed and the Council has increased the numbers of street wardens from six in 2003/04 to 18 currently. Target hardening programmes have increased resident safety. Over the past year residents' perception of anti-social behaviour as a problem has reduced by 17 per cent but overall fear of crime still remains a challenge.
- 81 Partnership activity has had limited success in tackling alcohol related issues. A task group has been recently set up but this has been slow in getting off the ground. An alcohol harm reduction strategy is now being developed at the county level in anticipation of the new unitary authority. Slow progress limits partner ability to tackle alcohol related disorder.
- 82 The Council has made some good progress in tackling domestic violence. Through a new domestic violence service it has supported 189 victims and as a result only two of these have suffered a repeat offence. As part of the service the Council has a transitional house with funding in place for two more. A freedom programme provides further support for victims encouraging them back into work or education.

Reducing health inequalities

- 83 The Council is making a good contribution to its priority to improve the health and well being of local people with a number of effective local projects in place. Access to static leisure facilities is good with top quartile performance for choice and opportunity. However satisfaction with sports and leisure is below average and historically comparatively few people participate in sport and active recreation.
- 84 In partnership the Council is supporting a significant programme of health improvements. Over 30 projects with a health focus have been implemented. These have been resourced through £2 million NRF and New Opportunities funding. Projects include walking and jogging initiatives and a local exercise action pilot to test out different evidence based community approaches to increasing the participation rates of adults and children in deprived groups. Additional support is also provided through benefits advice to improve the take up of benefit for those in most need; a one stop shop for substance misuse; art and mental health projects; GP referrals; increased stroke rehabilitation; breakfast clubs and fuel poverty initiatives.

- 85 The Wellness on Wheels (WOW!) initiative, a mobile fitness facility supported by a team of qualified fitness instructors, aims to remove some of the barriers which limit people's participation in physical activity, including cost and transport. WOW! is free of charge and travels around the district stopping off for ten-week periods. Seven legacy gyms in local community facilities have been opened where WOW! has been successful. They are locally run and formally constituted and charges are low, for example £1.50 a session or £5 a week. User satisfaction with these gyms is high and WOW! won the 2008 ANEC Shine Award for public service delivery on health inequalities and was highly commended in the 2008 Municipal Journal achievement awards for the same category. The WOW! activity also supports the Council's objective of reducing anti-social behaviour. There is some evidence for example in Coundon where the crime call out rate ten weeks prior to arriving was 84 incidents and during the ten weeks that WOW! was located at Coundon incidents reduced to 47. Overall these and many other physical activity programmes may have contributed to improved life expectancy which has increased by six months for both men and women over the period 2006/07.

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 Wear Valley District Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 3 to 7 March 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.