

Comprehensive Performance Assessment

Congleton Borough Council

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Introduction

- 1 Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) is the means by which the Audit Commission fulfils its statutory duty under Section 99 of the Local Government Act 2003 to make an assessment, and report on the performance, of local authorities. Corporate assessment is one element in the overall assessment that leads to a CPA score and category.
- 2 The purpose of the corporate assessment is to assess how well the Council engages with and leads its communities, delivers community priorities in partnership with others, and ensures continuous improvement across the range of Council activities. It seeks to answer three headline questions which are underpinned by five specific themes.
 - What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?
 - Ambition
 - Prioritisation
 - What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?
 - Capacity
 - Performance management
 - What has been achieved?
 - Achievement and Improvement

Executive summary

- 3 Congleton Borough Council was assessed as a 'weak' council in its corporate assessment in 2003. The assessment identified reasonable quality in service delivery, but weaknesses in corporate capacity and processes. The key areas for improvement identified were; clearer action plans to support corporate strategies and the community plan, partnership working, organisational capacity, performance management and delivery on cross cutting issues such as social inclusion and services for younger people. The Council has responded well to these improvement issues, it has progressed and it is now a 'good' council.
- 4 The Council and its partners have a shared vision for the district and there are robust connections across strategic plans. The ambitions for the local area are set out clearly within strategic plans and they are supported by a comprehensive structure of objectives and targets that challenge the Council and its partners to deliver tangible improvements. The Council's corporate strategy has a strong focus on the vitality of the four market towns and Holmes Chapel and provides a good sense of the borough as a 'place'.
- 5 The Council provides effective community leadership through its key partnerships and it has been influential in strengthening the local strategic partnership (LSP), which has now produced a clear and well understood vision for the borough. There is a good contribution to strategic partnerships, by both councillors and officers. A wide range of partners recognise that this contribution has significantly improved over the last two years and appreciate the leadership and support that is now provided.
- 6 Ambitions are underpinned by effective community engagement. The particular and different needs of groups within communities are reflected in some good examples of inclusive plans. Strategies meet the needs of the district as a whole, but data and intelligence is not comprehensive in respect of all neighbourhoods and community groups.
- 7 The Council has worked well with its communities and partners to identify clear priorities for improvement against which to plan its operations and review performance. This has supported stronger performance improvement in priority areas. The process of prioritising what it can do within its resources, to achieve the best results, is central to the way in which the Council operates. There has been a strong focus on priority issues through the executive and management team and this has been a key feature of the recovery of the Council from a position of severe financial difficulty in 2004/05. The rigorous prioritisation of activity plans and financial resources provided the framework for the Council to build a stable financial position, from which it could progress its objectives.

- 8 There has been a good response to the weaknesses in organisational capacity identified in the previous corporate assessment. The corporate arrangements for financial management have been strengthened, ensuring future plans are viable and that Council resources are effectively used. Training and development programmes are well established to improve skill levels for executive councillors and staff, but the forward planning of knowledge and skill requirements for the medium term is still underdeveloped.
- 9 Performance management arrangements have developed well since the last corporate assessment and now have coverage of service, corporate and partnership issues. They assist the Council in maintaining its focus on corporate priorities. The information supporting and demonstrating the achievement of community outcomes for all residents is still developing. Good use is made of learning and challenge from other organisations.
- 10 The Council is performing well in delivering against its objectives and the priorities it has agreed with partners and residents. Communities are prosperous and the local economy is being equipped for change through tourism promotion and capacity building measures with local businesses. There has been positive and more focused development of the four key towns through the market towns initiative (MTI) and programmes to improve public space, which benefit local communities and visitors.
- 11 The Council has responded to the challenges of the local housing market and has made a good contribution towards improving housing standards and provision. Community leadership has been demonstrated in tackling tensions between the interests of different groups within the community. The strong community and voluntary sector supports the involvement of local people in community life and active participation is strengthening communities.
- 12 Overall health and life expectancy within the local population is good and partners have targeted their efforts well to address certain health improvement issues. There are effective work programmes and initiatives to promote healthy lifestyles within the community and these are designed to reach vulnerable groups.
- 13 The borough is a safe place to live and has one of the lowest crime rates in the North West and amongst similar areas. Through work with partners, local concerns over the safety of town centres and anti social behaviour are being tackled effectively. The standard of cleanliness in neighbourhoods has improved strongly and there are very good examples of other public space improvements.

Areas for improvement

- 14 Progress has been slow in ensuring that equality and diversity issues are reflected across all policy areas and are considered within service design. The pace at which the Council is undertaking policy and service impact assessments, to ensure that they address the needs of key community groups, should be accelerated to inform future plans.
- 15 The Council needs more comprehensive data and intelligence on service performance and quality as experienced by all parts of the community. Performance management arrangements within the Council and with partners should develop to fully incorporate:
 - information on performance across different localities;
 - the service experience of vulnerable or disadvantaged groups; and
 - feedback on service quality, including performance against clear, published standards of service delivery.
- 16 The skills and knowledge of the workforce is not fully understood and this will inhibit planning with partners on how best to deploy or develop staff to deliver community objectives over the medium term. The full potential of all councillors is not being realised due to gaps in development and support arrangements. The evaluation of skills and knowledge requirements to deliver community ambitions should be progressed rapidly, so that it is available as background information for the new unitary council.

Summary of assessment scores

Headline questions	Theme	Score*	Weighted score
What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?	Ambition	3	6
	Prioritisation	3	6
What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?	Capacity	2	4
	Performance management	2	4
What has been achieved?	Achievement and Improvement	3	21
Weighted score			41
CPA category			Good
*Key to scores			
1 – below minimum requirements – inadequate performance			
2 – at only minimum requirements – adequate performance			
3 – consistently above minimum requirements – performing well			
4 – well above minimum requirements – performing strongly			

**Banding thresholds for determining CPA category

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

Context

The locality

- 17 Congleton is located in the south east of Cheshire. It has a geographical area of 211 square km with four main towns; Congleton, Sandbach, Alsager and Middlewich. It is a largely rural area with many villages, the principal one being Holmes Chapel.
- 18 The M6 motorway provides the key communication link to the national road network and the nearest conurbations are Stoke on Trent to the south and Manchester to the north. The road and rail connections provide for significant movements of commuters from the borough to urban centres and day visitors to local attractions such as Jodrell Bank.
- 19 The population of approximately 92,000 people (2004 mid-year estimates) is concentrated in the main towns. The population is expected to decrease slightly towards 2021, but the number of people aged over 65 years is expected to increase by 33 per cent over this period. Minority ethnic communities make up approximately 2.7 per cent of the population, the gypsy and traveller community being the largest single minority group. There has been a gypsy and traveller presence in Middlewich for over 50 years. In recent years the size of this community group has grown and the lack of appropriate accommodation to meet growing demand generated local controversy over planning applications and enforcement and community concern over the extent of change and its local impact. Site provision and the number of individual 'pitches' now available have increased to the highest in any Cheshire district and one of the highest levels in the North West.
- 20 The borough is affluent, rated as the third wealthiest in northern England and the 51st nationally. It is the least deprived district area overall in Cheshire (2007 index of multiple deprivation) and is ranked 303rd out of 354 areas nationally for deprivation. There are small pockets of deprivation in the borough and the most deprived ward is Congleton North.
- 21 Unemployment is low at 1.3 per cent, less than half the average rate for the North West. Unemployment in the most deprived ward in the borough, Congleton North is higher at 3 per cent. Manufacturing has been a key employment base but large scale industries such as chemicals processing have been reducing over the last decade and further significant job losses are due. Tourism generates an estimated £50 million in annual revenue, supporting local businesses and approximately 800 direct jobs. The overall employment level is expected to grow only slowly through to 2020, but with a significant shift in the profile, through manufacturing, construction and agriculture sectors reducing and retail, distribution, tourism and professional services being the growth areas.

- 22 The health of the local population is good and within the 26 indicators used in Department of Health profiles for 2007, none is significantly worse than the England average. In the borough men live longer than the average for the North West and England and women live longer than the average for the North West and similar to England. Health improvement issues highlighted in local profiles include; obesity (particularly in younger children), alcohol abuse and an increasing trend of teenage pregnancies (from a position well below the North West average).

The Council

- 23 The Council has 48 councillors, of whom 25 are Conservatives, 13 are Liberal Democrats, 6 represent Middlewich First and 4 are Independents (as at 30 April 2008). The Conservative party forms the administration with an overall majority.
- 24 The Council operates a Leader and executive model of governance. There are six members of the executive and four scrutiny committees. Four area fora, consisting of borough and parish and town councillors meet twice per year in local communities.
- 25 The Chief Executive leads a management team of an Assistant Chief Executive and four directors, organised to provide individual leadership against the Council's four goals of prosperous, healthy and safe communities and a high performing council. There are 20 section managers and overall the Council employs 338 staff (full time equivalent).
- 26 The net revenue budget is £11 million and reserves had been built up to £2.5 million at the end of the 2006/07 financial year. The Council has been debt free since the transfer of all of its housing stock in 1998. The council tax level for 2008/09 has been set at an average rate of £1430.93 for a band D property, which is above the average for shire district councils. The average council tax bill for the borough council services will be £170.92 an increase of just under 5 per cent from the previous year. The Council does not qualify for key funding targeted at reducing deprivation, such as neighbourhood renewal funding.
- 27 The Congleton Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) is the umbrella organisation for all partnership working in the borough. It brings together a wide range of organisations; parish and town councils, borough council, county council, police, fire, health sector, private sector and voluntary and community groups. An executive board manages partnership activity towards the delivery of the sustainable community strategy and the Cheshire local area agreement through eight themed partnerships.
- 28 Congleton BC is in transition and will cease to exist on 31 March 2009. A new unitary council, Cheshire East Council, will be formed on 1 April 2009. Cheshire East Council will cover part of the county of Cheshire and will replace the borough councils of Congleton, Crewe and Nantwich and Macclesfield and Cheshire County Council within the relevant area. Local elections to elect councillors to the new council will take place on 1 May 2008.

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

Ambition

- 29 The Council is performing well in this area. The Council and its partners have a clear long term vision for the local area, which addresses community needs and expectations. The Congleton sustainable community strategy is well connected to the overall strategic plans for Cheshire and to the corporate plans for the Council. The ambitions for the local area are set out clearly within strategic plans and they are supported by a comprehensive structure of objectives and targets that challenge the Council and its partners to deliver tangible improvements.
- 30 The Council and its partners have a shared vision and shared ambitions for the district. This vision is set out within the sustainable community strategy (2007/16). The vision recognises the needs of local communities and their aspirations for the future and is understood by councillors, staff and other stakeholders. The vision for 2016 is:

'for the borough to continue to be a safe, clean and healthy place to live and work, and that all our residents also benefit from; stronger, more cohesive communities, more vibrant market towns, improved public and community transport, reductions in childhood obesity, more affordable housing, the independent living needs of our ageing population being met, a more responsible attitude to our use of alcohol and local businesses being able to recruit people with the appropriate skills to do the job.'

The ambitions contained within this vision are supported through robust action plans organised under eight themes. These action plans contain challenging, outcome focused targets through to 2016, such as increasing visitor spend in the local economy by at least 50 per cent. This is a clear plan for the community setting out what partners intend to achieve and how this will be done.

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- 31** The Council's medium term corporate strategy (2008/12) sets out a clear plan for how the Council will contribute to the achievement of the community aspirations. The Council has four strategic 'goals'; to create communities that are prosperous, healthy and safe and an internally focused goal to be a high performing council. There is a clear structure of sixteen corporate objectives which provide robust connections to the sustainable community strategy and the Cheshire local area agreement (LAA). There are a range of outcome targets over this period that it has committed to, for example, increasing the number of jobs in the service sector by 20 per cent by 2010. However, there are some policy areas where the sustainable community strategy and the corporate strategy are not aligned. Policy aims and their relevant local targets, for example, to reduce carbon emissions and bring unemployment in the most deprived ward down to the borough average, are not reflected in the corporate strategy. The Council is clear what it intends to achieve over the next five to eight years.
- 32** The corporate strategy has a strong focus on the vitality of the four market towns and the large village of Holmes Chapel and provides a good sense of the borough as a 'place'. Goals and objectives describe an understanding of the local area that is shared by local communities, staff and local and strategic partners. The management team is able to connect policy issues at this geographic level through leadership responsibility being identified for the Chief Executive and individual directors against the five localities. They are able to lead and respond to developments such as the market town initiatives and in the 'renaissance' of Congleton town. The Council is able to focus its 'place shaping' agenda.
- 33** Ambitions for the local area are underpinned by effective community engagement. Communication within the Council, with partners and the community has improved and the Council now provides a good balance of direct engagement and facilitating others to identify and lead on community issues. Community engagement has strengthened particularly with the gypsy and traveller community, to understand and respond to local community tensions, and with children and young people to reflect their particular needs with the new children and young people strategy. The encouragement of, and engagement with, parish and town councils and community and voluntary groups has enabled them to make a strong contribution to community action planning. The Council has a good range of mechanisms through which it can hear community ideas and concerns.

- 34** Ambitions are based on a good understanding of the overall needs of the community. This understanding has been developed through some comprehensive surveys and analysis, but a comprehensive and up to date community intelligence base has been slow to develop. A representative customer panel (500 citizens), service focus groups and e-consultation pages supplement community information. Services such as housing have reflected the needs of the most vulnerable groups and information on community safety is shared effectively across partners to direct the safer communities theme. However, community and service information that reflects the particular needs and preferences of different geographic areas within the borough or disadvantaged groups is not yet a consistent feature of policy development and review. Plans are underway for a phased development of the community intelligence base across a wider range of partner activities, to enable sharing of more up to date community information. The Council and its partners are able to produce strategies that meet the needs of the district as a whole but not for all neighbourhoods and community groups.
- 35** The Council provides effective community leadership through its key partnerships. There is a good contribution to strategic partnerships, by both councillors and officers. The Council has been influential in strengthening the local strategic partnership (LSP), which has produced a clear and well understood vision for the borough. A wide range of partners recognise that this contribution has significantly improved over the last two years and appreciate the leadership and support that is now provided. The Council is now better placed to influence and support effective partnership working.
- 36** Local ambitions are clearly linked to the wider aims for the county area. The Communities of Cheshire Partnership (CCP) co-ordinates local and county wide action on shared priorities to ensure that they are aligned and the best benefit is being gained. The Congleton LSP Chair and the Council's Chief Executive represent the local area on the CCP, supporting the integration of action planning across partnerships. There are only a few areas where the borough is highlighted as a priority for improvement, due to its relative affluence, but the Council has ensured that its most deprived ward is incorporated into partnership plans and they have an effective joint focus on improvement in this community. The Council initially represented all districts in developing the LAA's children and young people theme, providing positive engagement and improving its own strategy development and awareness within the Council and LSP. Stronger partnerships have improved the focus of the Council's corporate strategy and the LAA.

- 37 The Council has demonstrated strong community leadership in responding to tensions within the Middlewich community. The growth of the gypsy and traveller community placed significant pressure on the availability of suitable accommodation, planning and licensing processes. The different needs and interaction between the settled residents, the more settled gypsy and traveller community and transient groups created concerns over community cohesion. Senior councillors and officers have contributed well to community engagement initiatives, both directly and through community networks, developing an understanding of the different local views and concerns and apply a balanced response. The concerns and divisions within the community are by no means resolved but the creation of broader community networks and understanding of the respective interests is providing a positive environment where difficulties can be addressed. An appropriate balance is being drawn between the different and sometimes conflicting needs of groups within communities.

Prioritisation

- 38 The Council is performing well in this area. The Council has worked well with its communities and partners to identify clear priorities for improvement against which to plan its operations and review performance. The process of prioritising what it can do within its resources to achieve the best results is central to the way in which the Council operates. Corporate plans are well structured and there is a very clear connection from the four corporate goals to objectives that are to be the priority focus over the medium term. The Council's priorities have high visibility and this ensures that an appropriate focus is sustained on their delivery.
- 39 There are clear and robust priorities that support the ambitions for the area. Seven of the sixteen corporate objectives in the corporate strategy (2008/12) are highlighted as the current priority areas:
- promote employment and inward investment (particular focus on town centres);
 - grow the visitor economy;
 - meet housing needs;
 - improve health and reduce health inequalities (particular focus on obesity);
 - activities for young people;
 - feeling safe (particular focus on fear of crime at night); and
 - quality of public open spaces.

- 40 There is a well structured review process to ensure priorities remain valid and relevant in changing circumstances. The priorities for improvement in the medium term corporate strategy 2006/10 were reviewed and updated in the new corporate strategy for 2008 onwards. The top priorities for improvement in the 2006/10 corporate strategy were; fear of crime in town centres at night, community cohesion in Middlewich, activities for young people, litter, tourism (particularly the canal network), the standard and affordability of housing (including returning empty properties into use). The revised priorities take medium and longer term issues forward in a consistent manner, but with some improvement in the clarity of what is expected to be achieved. The previous priority for improving community cohesion in Middlewich has been integrated into all policy areas with a particular emphasis on meeting the need for appropriate accommodation for gypsy and traveller groups. Objectives and priorities are formally reviewed and updated within its plans to change the emphasis and focus of activity, ensuring they remain relevant.
- 41 The Council has remained focused on its priorities. The rigorous prioritisation of activity plans and financial resources provides the framework for the Council to build a stable financial position from which it can progress its objectives. A persistent deficit position was removed through a strong focus on the key things that should be delivered and efficiency improvement. Community views are taken into account, especially in discretionary service areas, to maintain a focus on service users and the service aspects that are valued. The leisure and recreation service is a high expenditure area but the range of leisure centres and swimming pools has been sustained during budget reviews for its contribution towards activities for young people and health improvement and there is strong community support for this. A clear framework of agreed priorities enabled the Council to make some difficult decisions on its expenditure profile to reach a balanced budget in 2005, almost £1 million (10 per cent of net revenue expenditure) was removed from expenditure. Effective prioritisation is a key feature of the Council and this has enabled it to move away from a position of severe financial difficulty in 2004/05.
- 42 There is a robust planning framework. Priorities are cascaded through service plans down to individual employee development plans, ensuring clear lines of accountability. Plans are generally supported with a good range of outcome targets describing the tangible improvements expected against the corporate objectives. Objectives are translated into targets over the short, medium and longer term. There are short term actions and targets to make rapid improvement, for example reducing the neighbourhoods significantly affected by litter to below 20 per cent. Targets through to 2010 focus on improving the satisfaction of local residents, for example increasing the proportion that feel they get value for money from the Council to 70 per cent, and longer term targets to 2016, reflect the sustainable community strategy. Strategic partners and other stakeholders have a good understanding of the improvements that the Council is aiming to deliver, how they relate to their own plans and can hold the Council to account. This ensures there is a robust framework for the delivery of priorities.

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- 43 Action plans to deliver against the priorities are robust and informed by service users and partners. Supporting the corporate priority to meet people's housing needs, there is a co-ordinated set of programmes for home improvement including facilities for the disabled. An accident prevention scheme is supporting older people in living independently and safely in their homes through the provision of safety checks and minor home safety improvements for people aged over 60. The priority to develop activities for young people is also responsive to those groups within communities that are most in need. Targets to improve participation in leisure and sport for health improvement have a focus on increasing the participation of disabled young people. This ensures that the most disadvantaged groups benefit from improvements within communities.
- 44 The Council targets its resources effectively into its priority areas. The corporate strategy is clear about areas of operation that are not a priority for improvement effort, or that the Council intends to reduce its resource investment. For example, it has decided that the success of its focus on reducing the incidence of litter means that it will now sustain this performance and shift its emphasis for improvement to the wider contribution of public open space to the local quality of life. This clearly identifies those activities where the focus will be on efficiency gain, to maintain performance with no increases in resources, or reduced activity and investment so that effort can be diverted to priority areas. There is a strong connection between service plans and the medium term corporate and financial plans and this ensures that there is a sound delivery framework to support the Council's priorities and ambitions.

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

Capacity

- 45 The Council is performing adequately in this area. There has been a good response to the weaknesses in organisational capacity identified in the previous corporate assessment. The corporate arrangements for financial management have been strengthened, ensuring future plans are viable and that council resources are effectively used. Training and development programmes are well established to improve skill levels for executive councillors and staff but the forward planning of all knowledge and skill needs for the medium term is still underdeveloped.
- 46 Officers and councillors operate within a clear decision making framework. Through this framework the management team and the executive have established clear and productive arrangements for developing policy, action planning and reviewing progress against priorities. Relationships between councillors and the management team are good, as is support to portfolio holders by service heads. Relationships between the different political groups are positive with a clear focus on improvement. As a result there is clear accountability within decision making processes enabling relevant action to be taken.
- 47 Risk management is not fully effective at the corporate level. Risks are identified at a corporate, service and project level, but the actions required to reduce risk are often unclear. Risks are well managed within specific projects and this experience is being used as the model for improving arrangements further. Risk management is currently not sufficiently integrated into service planning and performance management arrangements.
- 48 Overview and scrutiny arrangements are adequate. Scrutiny committees provide a valuable contribution in policy development for the executive, such as on community cohesion in Middlewich and community safety. However, the extent of review and challenge against delivery of the corporate priorities is not always consistent across the scrutiny committees. The contribution towards, and review of, healthier community outcomes are the least clearly defined. Overall arrangements contribute to improvement and performance review but the best use of a positive challenge approach is not being made by scrutiny and councillors outside the executive.

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- 49** Information and communications technology (ICT) is effective in supporting delivery of the Council's objectives. ICT investment has improved the efficiency of services and supports staff in responding to customer requests through improved system capabilities that staff feel positively assists them in their jobs. Home working, remote access to office systems and electronic document processing and storage are increasingly being used. A shared call centre provides a 24-hour 'out-of-hours' service. Web site facilities are of a very good standard, providing access to services and the ability to carry out business with the Council. The structure of the web site is user friendly and has facilities for people with special requirements. The web site is capable of carrying out a range of transactions and service requests and provides a portal for community and voluntary organisations to provide service and support information. This demonstrates the Council is making good use of technology in providing service choice and access.
- 50** Partnership working enhances capacity. The Council has been effective in developing the capacity of the community and voluntary sector and delivery partnerships. It has created the support frameworks for the community and voluntary sector to develop and provide a valuable contribution. A local compact is nationally recognised as effective and provides clear and agreed financial investment, access to professional services and agreed ways of working. This is valued by the community and voluntary sector and has encouraged high and growing numbers of volunteers to support community activity. A number of services, for example building control, environmental health, payroll and procurement, are delivered jointly with other neighbouring councils. Strategic partnerships to deliver the housing strategy, economic development and ICT developments all enhance the Council's capacity. The Council's creative mix of arrangements supports its capacity to sustain and improve services, and generates efficiency gains.
- 51** The Council has the financial capacity to deliver its ambitions and priorities. The medium term financial strategy is robust and has increased financial reserves to a reasonable level. There is a balanced overall budget and good budgetary management. The Council is effective in pursuing value for money in its services. Service expenditure is comparatively low with the exception of priority areas such as leisure provision. It has been able to achieve its efficiency gain targets, supported by the office centralisation programme, which was completed to time and cost plans and has produced immediate and ongoing operational cost savings. The Council is now more able to secure additional grant funds directly and with partners to promote its priorities. The Bromley Farm community centre, market town initiatives and sport and play outreach activity are tangible examples where funds have been secured and effectively used with partners. The evaluation of asset use and the focus and delivery of the capital programme are adequate. Existing financial capacity is secure and sufficient to meet the needs of the Council and its plans.

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- 52** The Council provides good access to its services. Through an ambitious programme to centralise offices within the borough, a new headquarters has been built providing benefits of improved access, improved working conditions, efficiency gains and reduced environmental impact of operations. The offices also host office functions for the primary care trust and the CCTV control room. A framework of five 'One Stop Shops' has been progressively developed to provide wider community access to services as a counter balance to the centralisation of offices. They provide a range of opening times and service options for the public from part time up to full standard office hours. There are outline agreements with two town councils to provide extended opening hours for part time centres. The centres have not met the original aim of joint service delivery with the county council, but the centres and the range of services they provide will be reviewed against the development of the new unitary council. Considering the rural context of the borough, there is a good range of options through which residents can access services.
- 53** The training and development of councillors is adequate. There has been well focused and effective investment in developing the leadership behaviours of the executive members. However, investment in member support services and facilities has been limited and there is a low level of equipment provision, research and support to scrutiny, area fora and ward surgeries. There has been a clear improvement in the skills and contribution of councillors but there is too much reliance on the commitment and personal resources of individuals, restricting overall potential. This has created a strong and cohesive political leadership that represents the borough well at local and regional levels but the support for councillors outside of the executive is too weak to enable a full contribution by all.
- 54** Management and staff development programmes are effective and are supported by development review processes at an individual level. Staff at a variety of levels can access training and career enhancement opportunities and are positive about the opportunities available to them. Project management skills throughout management levels were prioritised for improvement, which has now given the Council greater skills and ability to manage complex projects, service delivery programmes and preparations for local government reorganisation. The £6.9 million project to build new council offices was completed to time and budget through strong project management and partnership projects are now benefiting from improved skill levels. The Council values its staff and provides recognition of their contribution through awards such as 'council worker of the year'. The skills and abilities of staff are improving and support service improvement.

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- 55** The strategic planning of workforce requirements for the Council is underdeveloped. Management information about the skills and competency levels within the workforce is still to be gathered, to enable development needs for the medium term to be planned. Joint working with other councils has been effectively used to address recruitment difficulties but strategic workforce planning across partners is not carried out. Council services remain vulnerable to recruitment difficulties affecting service delivery, for example, the processing of planning applications has deteriorated from excellent performance levels during 2007/08, due to staff vacancies. The capacity of the Council and its partners to deliver community plan objectives remains unclear.
- 56** Progress on equality and fairness issues has been slow. The Council has been slow to integrate the principles of equality and fairness within all its operations and in promoting these principles within the community. The implementation of plans to improve the evaluation of equality and diversity had been erratic but stronger progress has been made during the last year, achieving level two of the Equalities Standard for Local Government. Specialist advisors were commissioned to support community cohesion work in Middlewich and the Council has responded well to guidance, broadening this out to improve its overall policy approach. The Council's promotion of equality and fairness within the community remains underdeveloped.

Performance management

- 57** The Council is performing adequately in this area. There is comprehensive baseline information that is regularly updated so that the Council and its partners can monitor improvement and identify areas for intervention quickly. The information supporting and demonstrating the achievement of community outcomes for all residents is still developing. Performance management arrangements have developed well since the last corporate assessment and now have coverage of service, corporate and partnership issues. Good use is made of learning and challenge from other organisations.
- 58** There is an effective performance information system, which supports the Council in setting and monitoring progress against its own targets. Information is structured around the corporate objectives and this supports their monitoring at a portfolio and section level. There is timely input into the system by officers and a suite of reports are designed for quarterly reporting and can also be accessed on an up to date basis. Performance information on cross cutting and relevant community strategy objectives is less comprehensive. Performance management arrangements assist the Council in maintaining its focus on corporate priorities.

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- 59 Portfolio holders have a clear and focused involvement in the management of performance. They have a key role in reviewing performance and financial information with the management team, heads of service and staff on a regular basis. This identifies any budget or delivery problems and necessary intervention at an early stage, for example in improving street cleanliness and drawing in extra resources for the expanded recycling scheme. Portfolio holders, management team and scrutiny receive both detailed and summary information on service and financial performance, providing a good framework for review and action planning. The framework is positive and designed to generate action by councillors, service staff and with partners.
- 60 The Council's focus on customers and their service experience is adequate. Customer care standards are published providing clear promises of how customers will be treated and a number of services identify response standards for service requests. However service delivery standards are not comprehensive so do not present a clear description of the service residents can expect to receive and which they can then judge actual performance against. This means the Council is not able to monitor whether service performance is meeting user expectations.
- 61 The Council's performance management arrangements are not supported by detailed data and intelligence on performance. Engagement with service users, voluntary and community groups, town councils and other partners provides rich information on how services are perceived, but the performance information system is not making best use of this. There is a strong focus on resident satisfaction levels within performance review but this does not include detail of differences in service experience across geographic areas or for different groups within communities. Formal processes for registering complaints and compliments are in place but make a limited contribution towards providing qualitative feedback on services. Performance information is not yet comprehensive enough to provide a more rounded review of service quality and customer experience.
- 62 Performance management within partnerships is adequate. The Council compiles performance information across partner activities to support performance review at the LSP and is positive in encouraging co-ordinated delivery. There are good examples where the focus and effectiveness of partnership activity is managed well, such as for the community safety theme at the LSP and Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP), and for community development activity at Bromley Farm. The LSP is not yet fully effective in coordinating partnership activity and achievement across each of its themes, for example through stronger joint commissioning approaches. The gaps in modelling and sharing community intelligence across partners are being addressed through the Cheshire, Warrington and Halton Information Consortium (CWHIC) programme of work. This will be an important addition to enable review of the impact of action plans across all community groups. The Council and its partners are focused in delivering actions that improve outcomes for local people.

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

- 63** The Council makes good use of information, ideas and challenge from external sources to improve. There has been effective use of regional capacity building funds to search out examples of good performance in the areas identified for improvement, for example commissioning Tameside MBC to advise and support the development of the 'one stop shop' framework. External challenge is welcomed and recommendations from regulatory bodies are closely followed and have been reviewed with key agencies at formal improvement reviews ('round table' meetings) through to February 2008. The Council Leader has actively sought ideas and good practice through regional and national activity and introduced them within the Council, for example, identifying an organisation experienced in developing community cohesion to support partners in Middlewich and introducing 360 degree personal review for the leader role. A culture of learning and improvement has been established.

What has been achieved?

Achievement and Improvement

- 64 The Council is performing well in this area. It is delivering against its objectives and the priorities it has agreed with partners and residents. Council services are well organised and directed towards achieving benefits for the local community.
- 65 Using a comparable set of national indicators covering corporate health and shared priority areas the Council has improved 58 per cent of these measures over the last three years to 2006/07, which is above the average achieved by other district councils. The proportion of indicators that were in the best performing category in 2006/07 is 30 per cent, which is below the district average of 33 per cent. The Council uses a selected set of indicators relevant to its priority areas and 72 per cent of these measures improved in 2006/07. The Council has made progress across a wide range of performance areas and has made stronger progress in its priority areas.
- 66 Resident satisfaction levels have remained consistently high for most key service areas and those areas prioritised for improvement; cleanliness of public places, sports and leisure facilities, parks and open spaces achieved substantial improvements in satisfaction rates between 2003/04 and 2006/07. Residents have noticed tangible improvements in the service areas and community outcomes that the Council has prioritised.
- 67 The following sections highlight the achievements of the Council and its partners under its three community focused goals for a prosperous, healthy and safe borough. There is particular reference to achievement against the top priorities from the 2006/10 corporate strategy and the refreshed priority objectives for 2008/12.

Prosperous borough

- 68 Local communities are prosperous, with low unemployment rates and no local areas suffering from significant deprivation, compared to the most deprived wards nationally. Partners are well informed about economic trends and encourage positive change to the profile of local economic activity. A new economic development and tourism strategy is providing a better focus for partners to coordinate support and investment that will stimulate new businesses and improve the tourism offering. Ambitious partnership plans to increase visitor spend by at least 50 per cent are supported through key developments in the tourism offering.

- 69 The market towns initiative (MTI), improvements to public space and the growth potential of the local canal network and equestrian sports facilities are being used effectively for local community benefit and tourism growth. The amphitheatre development in Middlewich supports the borough programme of festivals, for example, the Folk and Boat and 'Roman' Middlewich, and received a 'green apple' award for environmental improvement. The Brereton Heath countryside park has been developed to the green flag standard, providing nature walks for local people and visitors. The improvement and promotion of local facilities is supporting this growth sector of the local economy. The number of visitors to the borough is increasing, reaching three million per year, the vast majority being day visitors.
- 70 The local economy is being well supported through capacity building measures with local businesses. The joint venture company, South East Cheshire Enterprise (SECE), delivers economic development and tourism services and provides a central contact point, which local businesses value. North West Development Agency (NWDA) grant enabled the establishment of an 'enterprise centre' from which SECE operates 'Learn direct' services for core skills, links to lifelong learning and targeted work, which currently support over 400 active learners. Provision includes bespoke courses for people displaced by manufacturing redundancies. SECE provides support for business growth through start-up support, managed workspace and site location information. Over 500 small and medium-sized businesses have been assisted in starting up their enterprise. Local people are being supported to improve their economic wellbeing.

Healthy borough

- 71 The Council has responded well to the challenges of the local housing market and has made a good contribution to improving housing provision towards meeting the needs of local people. The affordability of housing is a significant local concern and there has been limited impact against the scale of the problem. The Council is achieving its pragmatic target of providing 50 affordable units per year to 2010 and is supporting this through initiatives such as; returning empty property into the housing supply (an average of 20 units per year), assisted purchase, discount for sale, rural housing enabler and shared ownership. Policy requirements for a minimum of 30 per cent affordable units and also a minimum of 25 per cent low cost units (development of over 10 dwellings) within housing developments, are delivering smaller units to redress the imbalance of large detached houses in the local market. The Council is directing efforts to assist residents in entering the housing market.

- 72 The standard of social housing is above average and all sectors are improving through effective programmes of work. The national targets to provide all social housing and most private housing for vulnerable groups to decent homes standard by 2010 are on course to be met. Partners are currently exceeding the target to improve the standards of private sector homes for vulnerable people with approximately 110 units improved over 3 years against a target of 84 units. Housing improvements have been well targeted towards the key local issue of energy efficiency and warmth. A care and repair agency and 'handyman' service provides excellent support to older people, recognised through its charter mark award, to enable them to live independently and safely. There are good interventions to prevent homelessness and provide support to vulnerable groups that face particular barriers to suitable accommodation, for example ex-offenders and recovering drug addicts. Housing services have provided good support to local people, particularly vulnerable groups, to enable them to access suitable housing.
- 73 The Council has been influential in improving community cohesion in Middlewich. Strong community leadership and close working with the gypsy and traveller community, community groups, the town council, county council, police and other partners has identified and reduced sources of tension and disagreement within Middlewich. Community development activities, such as art projects, have been used to break down divisions within the local community and improve cohesion. Co-ordinated work across neighbourhood level teams for the police, highway, environmental health, refuse and cleansing activities provide responsive services for local circumstances. The co-ordinated planning of activities across services and partners is contributing to tackling complex community issues, but the need for sufficient accommodation, particularly transient sites, is not yet resolved.
- 74 The promotion and support of the community and voluntary sector is very good. The local compact has received its third successive national commendation for the work the Council carries out with Congleton District Voluntary Action (CDVA). This is one of only 22 commendations awarded nationally. Events are organised to showcase activity and community benefits, encouraging more volunteers. The strong community and voluntary sector supports the involvement of local people in community life and active participation is strengthening communities.
- 75 Health within the local population is good and life expectancy for men and women is better than the average for the North West. The Council directs its services effectively to promote healthy lifestyles and reduce health inequalities. Leisure centres are providing targeted services for people with identified health improvement needs and to promote physical activity. The active START physical activity referral scheme to leisure centres provides tailored programmes to improve people's health and these programmes have proved popular with 310 referrals in 2006/07 and good retention rates. The levels of participation and volunteering in sport and active recreation are good and access to play, summertime activities and outreach work have all improved through partner investment. The environmental health team deliver talks to schools (over 5,000 children) and voluntary groups on healthy eating and food safety issues. Council services are prevention focused and active in promoting behavioural change to achieve corporate objectives of improved health and well being in the community.

- 76 The Council actively promotes health amongst older people, vulnerable groups and its own workforce. Interventions are provided to improve independence, health and well being and there is a comprehensive programme targeted at vulnerable groups such as in the most disadvantaged area in Congleton. Healthy lifestyles are promoted amongst the Council's workforce. A range of opportunities are available through health, weight and fitness checks. The Council is using its services and its position as a significant local employer to encourage healthier lifestyles.

Safer communities

- 77 The borough is a safe place to live and has maintained one of the lowest crime rates compared to the rest of the North West and similar areas over recent years. The overall crime level continues to fall, reducing by almost 6 per cent in the year to January 2008 compared to the same period in 2006/07. The Council and its partners are unlikely to meet the national crime reduction target. There is little impact of crime on the quality of life for local people.
- 78 The Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP) has effectively tackled issues of public concern. The Council's community wardens work very well with local policing teams through joint planning and patrols. Under age drinking and nuisance behaviour in public areas is being effectively tackled through the ARCangel programme, confiscating alcohol and providing advice and information on substance misuse to reduce harmful behaviour. There is a visible uniformed presence in town centres and anti social behaviour (ASB) levels have reduced, however, public reassurance of town centre safety at night has been slow to improve.
- 79 There have been good improvements in parks and open spaces. Congleton park is a good example of transformation from an poor facility prone to ASB, to a prestigious and well used community resource. The engagement of local business, charitable groups and parish and town councils has been a key feature in designing and delivering the improvement in public space. The proportion of residents concerned over vandalism and graffiti reduced from 58 per cent in 2003/04 to 28 per cent in 2006/07. The quality and use of public space has improved, contributing to the quality of community life.
- 80 Programmes have been successful in generating community improvement and improved social behaviour. A 'Like to bike' programme successfully engaged young people at risk of offending in a structured course of motorbike riding instruction and maintenance. Improvements in reduced nuisance behaviour on motorbikes, social behaviour, skills and confidence building were achieved. There is increasing provision for meaningful activity for young people contributing to their development, safety, reduced ASB and improved quality of life in the local area.

- 81 The cleanliness of neighbourhoods is now good and has shown rapid improvement over recent years. The level of litter in neighbourhoods was in the worst 25 per cent of councils in 2006/07, with low resident satisfaction levels. The service has been radically changed with an improved focus on the most problematic areas. Cleanliness standards are now good and well ahead of improvement targets. There has been a significant contribution by volunteer 'clean teams', ranging from school children to retired residents, which organise additional litter picking rotas in the town centres and for significant events such as festivals. Community participation in improving a local priority issue and the wider contribution to community vitality has been nationally recognised and is a credit to the vibrant community and voluntary sector.
- 82 The impact of local household waste on the environment has been reduced. Refuse collection is a cost efficient service, which has provided the opportunity for the Council to maintain weekly collections and to significantly expand its recycling scheme. The recycling rate is expected to increase to over 40 per cent in 2007/08 from 36 per cent in 2006/07. This has contributed to reducing the amount of waste going to landfill. The Cheshire Waste Partnership, of which the Council is a partner, developed a joint household waste strategy in 2002. The supporting policies to maximise recycling and composting have been implemented well locally. However the action plan for waste minimisation has not been effective and the total amount of household waste generated in the district has continued to increase. The management of waste has improved and a good range of recycling services are available to residents, to support environmental objectives.

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 Congleton Borough 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.