

Corporate Assessment Report

September 2008



Comprehensive Performance Assessment

Rochford 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 Rochford District Council has made good progress in improving frontline services, modernising its decision making structures and arranging to deliver improved recycling and waste collection. In 2004, Rochford District Council was a 'weak' council; now it is a 'good' council.
- 4 The Council delivers good quality frontline services which local residents are satisfied with. Compared to other English councils, a wide range of services have high satisfaction. These include waste collection, parks and open spaces, sports and leisure. Residents overall satisfaction with the running of the Council rates among the top 25 per cent of English councils.
- 5 Good cross-cutting work with partners secures a wide array of outcomes against local priorities. This has improved access to services and the quality of life for all local people. They now benefit from high quality leisure centres, a safe environment and a caring approach to service delivery that seeks to meet the needs of vulnerable members of the community.
- 6 The Council has focused attention on, and improved those services, that were performing poorly, such as homelessness, and revenues and benefits.
- 7 It has put considerable time and effort into planning the improvements around recycling and composting. This included consulting and involving local people and Essex County Council, and negotiating to get a value for money arrangement that will also deliver high levels of recycling across the whole district. The Council has agreed targets to almost double and then treble existing recycling rates within two years. There are also clear and challenging targets to reduce energy and water use, which all helps offset the fact that otherwise the Council has been slow to implement significant environmental initiatives.
- 8 There has been a concerted and successful effort to develop and secure the capacity the Council needs to deliver the level of service it aspires to. It has speeded up decision making by adopting the executive model of governance, and established mechanisms to involve local people, through three area committees. It works well in partnership with others and has used partnership to increase capacity. It has successfully developed its workforce, through comprehensive workforce development and training.
- 9 The overview and scrutiny function (Review Committee) has contributed to service improvement and policy development, but has yet to fully develop its role of examining the performance of the Executive. The inability of most backbench councillors to undertake scrutiny limits the effectiveness and scope of its work.

- 10 Performance management supports improvement to Council services. User feedback, complaints and experiences help shape service delivery. Robust appraisal supports individual target setting and delivery. Targets for service improvement are set and there are good mechanisms in place to ensure projects are delivered on time. Training, and good officer challenge, helps to set robust and explicit targets, but this is not fully embedded across the Council and targets are not all outcome focused. Performance reports do not allow easy tracking of progress against ambitions and priorities, and lack full integration with resource management.
- 11 Performance management in partnerships is adequate but not yet sufficient to ensure that cross-cutting initiatives, which can only be delivered by all partners working closely together, are consistently and reliably delivered.
- 12 The Council has good political and management leadership. It provides good leadership for the community within its wider partnerships, which partners' value and acknowledge.
- 13 The overall and shared ambitions for the area meet the underlying needs of the community. Good engagement, consultation and local knowledge underpin these ambitions. However, the ambitions within the community strategy are not consistently supported by clear, robust outcome based targets or action plans.
- 14 The ambitions and priorities for the Council are very broad, covering everything councils do. The published priorities, although clearly linked to the ambitions, and developed following consultation, are not specific or explicit in what the Council will do. This weakens the scope to use performance management to deliver priorities but more importantly, leaves councillors, staff and partners unclear about what is, and is not, a priority for the Council. Partners, in particular, are frustrated about this lack of clarity and the initially slow response to some issues that can result. But they have confidence that, once the Council decides what it is going to do, they will deliver it effectively and efficiently.

Areas for improvement

- 15 Overall, the Council is delivering good frontline services. It has been supportive of partnerships, such as Thames Gateway South East (TGSE) and the Essex Local Area Agreement (LAA). In this context, what is important to the Council is clear and consistent. However, partners do not understand what the Council is about. The Council's corporate plan is broad; the six objectives cover everything the Council does and the 16 priorities, although a significant reduction on the 49 in the 2004 Corporate Plan, are still too broad. The Council needs to ensure that:
- the Corporate Plan contains a clear, concise and locally based vision the Council aims to deliver. This needs to be understood by staff, councillors and partners; and support the Sustainable Community Strategy, and regional plans the Council is involved in including the Essex LAA and TGSE;
 - the ambitions are specific to Rochford and identify areas the Council will improve or maintain; and
 - ambitions are supported by clearly deliverable priorities. These should be expressed in an explicit manner, detailing exactly what will improve and/or change should the priority be delivered. The priorities should support the ambitions and overarching vision.
- 16 Communication is improving, but the Council needs to ensure that partners and local residents fully understand what the Council is aiming to do. To do this it needs to ensure that its message is consistent and clear, and that the process of communication is seen as a mechanism to support the delivery of its ambitions and priorities.
- 17 Performance Management has already delivered some good outcomes, helping improve poorly performing services and helping ensure that projects keep on track. The Council needs to continue to improve performance management by:
- ensuring the community plan is supported by clear, outcome based, targets with deadlines, and setting challenging and specific targets for the corporate plan. These should support delivery of individual ambitions and priorities;
 - revising performance management reports to enable the Council to track and manage performance against its ambitions and priorities as well as specific services and at divisional plan level. This should be integrated with resource management; and
 - ensuring that performance management with partners is developed.

Summary of assessment scores

Headline questions	Theme	Score*	Weighted score
What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?	Ambition	2	4
	Prioritisation	2	4
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	2	4
What has been achieved?	Achievement and Improvement	3	21
Weighted score			39
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	45-60
Good	36-44
Fair	28-35
Weak	21-27
Poor	20 or less

Context

The locality

- 18** Rochford District is situated in south-east Essex, within a peninsula between the rivers Thames and Crouch. The south of the district borders the urban areas of Southend-on-Sea and Castle Point, and the North Sea is to the east. Much of the district's 65 square miles is designated as green belt and there are many miles of coastline and nationally important areas of salt marsh. Foulness Island and some other areas in the east of the District are under Ministry of Defence control. There are three significant Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) - the Crouch and Roach estuaries, Foulness and Hockley Woods.
- 19** About 81,100 people live in the district (mid-2006 estimate), an increase of 3 per cent since 2001. Over half of the population live in one of the three main towns. The largest town is Rayleigh, and the other two main settlements are Hockley and Rochford. All three towns have good rail connections to London and Southend. The rest of the district is predominantly rural although the London Southend Airport is situated within the district and the airport and surrounding area are part of the Thames Gateway regeneration area.
- 20** It is a generally prosperous part of the country with relatively low deprivation, being 314th least deprived out of 354 districts (based on the Indices of Multiple deprivation, 2007). Gross weekly pay is significantly higher in Rochford, at £545.60 (2007) compared to the English average of £462.60. Unemployment is low as well. In March 2008, the claimant count was just 1.0 per cent, less than half the national rate of 2.2 per cent. However at the ward and sub ward level there are pockets of deprivation with one Super Output Area (SOA) in the top 10 per cent most income deprived in the country.
- 21** The overall health of most people is good. Life expectancy is high; the average life expectancy is 84.3 years for women (compared to the English average of 81.6 years) and 79.3 years for men (English average of 77.3 years). Early deaths from smoking, heart disease and strokes, are better than the English average. However, physical activity in adults and healthy eating in adults are both slightly poorer than the national average and the incidence of obesity has increased faster than the national rate.
- 22** The number of young people live well and achieve good education results. Young people, under 15 years old, 'not in good health' is lower than the national average. 78.7 per cent of young people, at key stage 4, achieve 5 A*-C GCSEs, significantly higher than the national figure. The proportion of children who are obese is below the national average, and the proportion of children who are physically active is higher than the national average. Teenage pregnancy rates are about half the national average.

- 23** At 98.78 per cent, the proportion of people describing themselves as 'White British' is the highest in Essex, and considerably above the national average of 87 per cent. Ward level data indicates that there are Indian and Chinese communities within the district mainly linked to the restaurant trade and often linked to communities outside the district. The overall population is described as 'stable' with the third lowest recorded rates of migration in the whole of England. This is partly as a result of dispersal, in the 1960s, from London to the district and in particular to Rayleigh, which has resulted in tight and lasting community cohesion. Social exclusion is most likely to come from lack of access to transport and older age; the biggest group likely to be excluded are those with a hearing impairment.
- 24** Overall crime levels are very low compared to similar areas. For all crime, the rate in Rochford is lowest when compared to similar areas, and the same picture exists for the All British Crime Survey, which uses a basket of ten crimes. All crime is low, and the incident of most types of crime is falling, including theft of vehicles, theft from a motor vehicle, domestic burglary and criminal damage. Although total drug and alcohol related crime remains low overall, incidents have increased slightly in contrast to the overall trend of a significant reduction in crime.

The Council

- 25** Rochford District Council comprises of 39 councillors. Thirty-three are Conservative, five Liberal Democrat, and one Rochford Residents (independent). The Council operates the leader and executive model of governance, although it has only recently switched to this model having previously operated through service committees. There is one scrutiny committee, chaired by the opposition, and three area committees. In addition, there is an Audit Committee, a Standards Committee, an Appeals Committee, a Licensing Committee and a Development Control Committee.
- 26** The Council employs the equivalent of 211 full-time people. The Chief Executive leads the staff and is supported by two corporate directors - one focusing on internal operation, such as finance and performance management, the other focusing on delivering services to local residents. There are six heads of service who, with the Chief Executive and two strategic directors, form the Senior Management Team of nine.
- 27** The Council's net revenue budget for 2008/09 is £12.3 million and the capital programme for the year is valued at £2.3 million. For a Band D property, the Council Tax for 2008/09 is £188.01, an increase of 4.87 per cent over the previous year.

- 28 The Leader of the Council chairs the Rochford Local Strategic Partnership. The Council is a member of the local Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP). It has recently transferred its housing stock to a local housing association through the Large Scale Voluntary Transfer (LSVT) process. Leisure centres are run in partnership with a private company; a new contract to deliver high levels of recycling and composting across the district has just been awarded. The Council uses private contractors and partnerships, to deliver a range of other services including some elements of revenues and benefits and the provision and maintenance of its information technology (IT) requirements.
- 29 The Council's vision, in the Corporate Plan 2007/10, is '*to make Rochford District the place of choice to live, work and visit*'. It is supported by six broad objectives that relate to general issues covering all aspects of the Council's work. The six objectives in the Corporate Plan are:
- provide an excellent, cost effective, frontline service for all our customers;
 - work towards a safer and more caring community;
 - provide a green and sustainable environment;
 - encourage a thriving local economy;
 - improve the quality of life for people in our District; and
 - maintain and enhance our local heritage.

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

Ambition

- 30 The Council performs adequately in this area. The Council understands and responds well to local needs, using a wide range of consultation and feedback methods. Ambitions in some areas are clear and challenging, recognising and the responding to the Council's role in partnerships in the county and sub-region. Effective community leadership is demonstrated through the Council's role in the CDRP, Thames Gateway South East (TGSE) and Essex LAA2. The new sustainable community strategy, being developed, is informed by the ambitions of the county and sub-region and through the engagement of the local community. But the objectives published in the Council's Corporate Plan, are broad - covering everything the Council does; promotion of the Corporate Plan has created some confusion, especially amongst partners, about the Council longer term plans.
- 31 Overall ambitions for the area meet the underlying needs of the community. The community strategy, adopted in 2004, provides a vision for the district in five, ten and 15 years time, together with high level ambitions. It reflects the concerns of local people, having been directly informed by consultation, and was developed and adopted by a range of partners. There are six high level themes, such as 'feeling safe', 'looking after our environment' and 'healthy living' and these link with the TGSE sub-regional strategy. Local issues are identified and understood by the Council and its partners, such as the impact of an ageing population on public services and balancing the needs of young and older people. Together this understanding provides a sound basis for partners to develop their own plans.
- 32 The Council and its partners have found out what local people need. The Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) has commissioned research about the local area, whilst the Council has undertaken work with partners to identify the needs of the local community. The Council ensures that previously hard to reach groups, such as young people, BME and those identified at a risk of being disadvantaged, are included in consultation and policy development. Councillors on the leading group have started to use this to identify longer term ambitions, which were published recently in the Council's Vision to Reality document. Three area committees have been established to improve involvement of local people in decision making. Although the full benefit has yet to be realised, some issues, such as littering and anti-social behaviour, have already been identified through the Area Committees, and incorporated into plans.

- 33 The Council provides good leadership for the community. For example, the leader of the Council chairs the LSP, and has helped identify areas for further improvement; the Chief Executive chairs the county-wide strategic group around community safety and drug, alcohol and substance misuse, both areas of concern with local residents. The Council is a full member of the TGSE where it has clearly identified its role (as the 'green part of the gateway') and been able to secure additional funding for the district, and has been active in the development of the Essex LAA2. Partners value the approach and contribution Rochford District Council brings, and the Council is able to demonstrate improvements arising from partnership working. These include town centre improvements, activities for young people which help reduce anti social behaviour and improved sheltered and extra care housing provision for older people.
- 34 Some corporate documents provide significant clarity over plans, especially where there are ambitious plans for improvement. For example, the development of the Cherry Orchard Jubilee Country Park clearly supports the Council's role in providing the green elements of TGSE and responds to local need; there are clear development plans for the future. Improvement following the previous Corporate Assessment was project managed through clear plans with ambitious targets for addressing identified weaknesses. However, this clarity is not evident in the Corporate Plan. The stated aims are not sufficiently aligned to the overarching vision for the district, and the links with the community strategy are not clear or explicit. A consequence is that partners are clear about the ambition in certain areas, but are not confident that they fully understand everything the Council is planning to do. Improvements have recently been made, such as the *Vision to Reality* document, which goes some way to providing an overarching vision, with some specific aspirations, under the broad ambitions. This will feed into the refresh of the corporate plan, providing greater clarity on ambitions and has been recognised by partners as an important step forward.
- 35 The ambitions within the community strategy are not consistently supported by clear, robust outcome based targets or action plans. An overarching action plan was produced in 2004, but most of these actions were short term. This has been recognised by the Council and the LSP and a number of actions are currently being undertaken. The LSP has, for example, restructured to support the delivery of the second county wide Local Area Agreement (LAA2) and has commissioned additional research and consultation to inform a new Sustainable Community Strategy, due to be adopted later in 2008. The latest version is focused solely on areas where partnership working will bring improvements. The lack of existing targets means that partners are unable to ensure their plans fully support the community plan.

- 36 Communication has not successfully ensured local people, staff or partners, fully understand the Council's ambitions. Partners, staff and councillors share an understanding of what the Council is about - 'quality of life' and 'high quality services'. It has achieved this through close partnership working, good project plans and a well received bi-monthly Council newsletter, *Rochford District Matters*, which is delivered to all homes in the district. There is good understanding of the issues the Council is currently working on, such as improvements to recycling, where the Council contributes to partnerships and the key issues facing the district (see paragraph 31). But the broadness of the Corporate Plan does not provide clarity about how the Council intends to respond to these challenges (although some responses are detailed in other Council documents). Promotion of the Corporate Plan has caused some confusion about the Council's specific ambitions for the area. This is a source of frustration for partners who would like to align their plans to support the Council across all its ambitions, not just those they are currently working with the Council on.

Prioritisation

- 37 The Council performs adequately in this area. Local needs are taken into account when setting priorities and considering strategic projects; resources are targeted to support these, and individual projects are well promoted. However, the Council has struggled to successfully communicate its published priorities. Partners, councillors and staff lack an understanding of what the medium term plans for the Council are, although there is a good understanding of projects the Council is undertaking, and the rationale for them. Partners are frustrated about the lack of clarity over future priorities for the Council, but have confidence that, when the Council announces what it will do, that they will deliver it effectively. This confidence stems from a good track record of delivering significant change projects that are well managed, communicated effectively and takes into account local needs and address national priorities.
- 38 Priorities support the overall ambitions for the area. The Corporate Plan 2007/10 sets 16 priorities to support the overall ambitions of the Council (an improvement on the 49 in the 2004/07 corporate plan), but most of these are vague or non specific, such as 'make the best use of historical links and heritage' and 'improve the environment'. The corporate plan does not provide more detail; although it lists what it considers 'measures of success', these are often vague, such as 'low levels of homelessness and 'usage figures of leisure facilities'. Project plans, for larger initiatives such as access to services, and divisional plans, contain more details and targets. The Council has recognised the weaknesses in this approach. An additional document, *Vision to Reality*, attempts to set a longer term vision but does not identify clear priorities. The latest draft corporate plan to 2013 contains specific measures, and outcome based targets, together with a headline action plan, with named responsibility for delivery which links to the five year medium term financial plan (MTFP) but this plan has yet to be adopted, or communicated to staff and partners, and is still based around the six existing broad priorities.

- 39 Councillors, staff and partners lack a consistent understanding of what the Council's priorities are. Although the Council has made considerable effort to communicate its priorities, the views of what is important to it vary. Even the Council magazine confused the message; in summer 2007 it claimed the important messages were 'recycling; sport and leisure, open spaces and environmental health' which (as a whole) are neither linked to the ambitions or priorities, or reflect the breadth of what the Council is actually trying to achieve. The Council's partners are frustrated as this lack of clarity hinders planning and joint working.
- 40 Good use of consultation and local knowledge help determine priorities. The Council has strengthened mechanisms to involve local people, such as through the area committees and its citizen's panel. Access to services consultation included profiling typical users, including those considered hard to reach, and mystery shopping has considered the needs of those who maybe disadvantaged, such as those with a hearing impairment. Together with partners, it has commissioned a variety of research, such as *Rochford Futures*, and uses away days to help plan longer term initiatives. It actively considers local needs along side regional needs and national priorities. It has adjusted priorities and projects, to support the Essex LAA2 and the TGSE. It has used external challenge, such as the previous corporate assessment and a voluntary improvement board, and service inspections to inform priorities, and has established action plans to deliver these improvements.
- 41 Robust strategies ensure major projects get delivered. When a significant project is identified, the Council plans well and supports change with a good strategy that is well project managed. It has a good track record of delivering major projects, such as the leisure contract, improvement to revenues and benefits and the transfer of housing stock to a housing association. It staggers projects to ensure it has the capacity to deliver the required change. It has planned for a number of years to improve recycling and waste collections, taking into account national priorities, the requirements of Essex County Council (as the waste disposal authority), the desires of local residents and options to ensure it identified a cost effective solution. It has secured a new contract to deliver significant change that takes into account local needs and regional and national priorities. Consequently, partners have confidence that projects get delivered.
- 42 Targeted action responds to need and addresses local concerns. For example, in recognising that opportunistic crime sometimes targeted homes because of the untidy condition of the garden and that trips were common among elderly people as they tried to maintain their garden, the Council established a gardening and 'handy-person' service. This helps maintain gardens and undertakes minor repairs and alterations to homes. This scheme is well received in the area, gaining 100 per cent satisfaction amongst users, and has helped reduce the fear of crime.

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- 43** The Council is very good at communicating specific plans and projects to local people. It has undertaken effective consultation and communication about the new recycling and kitchen waste collections. It took time and effort to understand the concerns of local people, for example around alternate week collections, and again took time to understand concerns that local residents might have about changes to the scheme. Every house was given the opportunity to voice concerns, such as where to store wheeled bins and how to manoeuvre them. Over 200 home visits have already been made to discuss, on a one-to-one basis, issues and, where possible, identify solutions which include different containers, assisted collections and sharing bins with neighbours. Information about the new scheme is delivered in a dedicated recycling newsletter, *Rochford Recycling News*, which follows the same format as the Council's own newsletter, *Rochford Matters*. Local people understand and appreciate what the Council is currently doing.
- 44** Financial and service planning are effectively aligned, with the medium term financial plan (MTFP) geared to deliver priorities. Divisional plans and the MTFP reflect the Council's priorities and, in particular, larger projects. The MTFP identified significant projects that the Council is committed to, and has earmarked funding to implement them. For example, the MTFP identifies additional resources to fund the next stages for the development of Cherry Orchard Jubilee Country Park, and to implement the Council's IT Strategy. It also identifies areas that the Council has considered a low priority, such as deciding to not actively enforce the smoking ban but use the additional resources to improve the cleanliness of the district - which local people identified as more important. However, all non-priorities are not widely communicated.

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 well in this area. Recent changes have strengthened political leadership; the Chief Executive has a high profile and is respected by partners. Improvements have been made to increase capacity, reduce sickness, and improve services by working in partnership and taking account of the needs of local people, including those who are at risk of being excluded. Resources, identified in the MTFP, are sufficient to deliver its priorities and plans. Risks are well managed. There is a good approach to training for councillors and staff. Scrutiny is contributing effectively to policy development and service improvement but has yet to fully establish its role in challenging the actual level of performance achieved. The Council is not yet gaining the full benefit from councillors following the transition to the executive model of governance.
- 46 The Council has good political and managerial leadership. Political leadership has been strengthened with the introduction of the leader and executive model of governance in 2007. Executive members now take responsibility for their areas and take the lead in public and Council discussions. This has made decision making more transparent and timely for partners and the public. The Chief Executive has taken a personal responsibility over a number of initiatives, both around internal structures and on external partnerships, and this approach is respected and welcomed by partners. The Council's leadership is open and respectful. Senior staff now have a greater focus on cross service and partnership working and provide policy advice and guidance to portfolio holders in support of their decision-making role. For example, the executive was able to meet quickly in order to approve the draft Joint Area Action Plan (JAPP) for London Southend airport, and its environs.
- 47 Working relationships between staff and councillors are open and constructive. Portfolio holders meet regularly with lead officers to discuss performance and up and coming issues. Portfolio holders focus on setting overall policy and do not seek to be involved in minor operational issues. The changes to staff and councillor structures over the last two years have enabled councillors and staff to develop clearly understood roles that help focus on delivery of the Council's vision.

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- 48 Effective capacity building strengthens the Council's ability to deliver its objectives. Developing its internal capacity has been a priority for the Council. A comprehensive workforce development plan addresses the key areas identified as crucial to the delivery of customer focused services. Training and development for councillors and staff is high profile, targeted and accessible, although some councillors resist attending training courses. A consistent focus on addressing sickness absence has resulted in low and reducing staff sickness rates. Staff are encouraged and supported to be innovative and work flexibly; flexible working has been introduced in some areas, and staff can be involved in cross-cutting officer working groups.
- 49 Scrutiny is developing a track record of successful in depth reviews that lead to improvements for local people. A single Review Committee, chaired by an opposition councillor, and with dedicated staff support, is improving services for local people and directly influencing policy development. For example, the task and finish review into local bus services led to the introduction of a market day bus service for an isolated community, providing access to markets, GP and post office services. A review of the Council's approach to climate change led to savings in energy and water use and helped identify challenging targets to help reduce the environmental impact of providing services. However, the recent transition to the executive model means scrutiny is not yet fully holding the Executive to account on performance towards Council priorities.
- 50 The Council is not using councillor's capacity to full effectiveness. All councillors are on one of the area committees and on development control committee. There are a number of other statutory committees, such as Licensing and Standards Committee. However, participation in all scrutiny activity, including the task and finish groups, is limited to the eight members of the Review Committee. This means that the majority of backbench councillors do not have the opportunity to develop their skills and expertise in this increasingly important area. This limits the effectiveness and scope of the work that the Review Committee can undertake.
- 51 Risk management is good. Roles and responsibilities are clearly laid out in the corporate risk framework. The corporate risk register assesses the risks attached to the Council's key areas of work and the adequacy of the controls in place. This, together with the regular review of the register, ensures that risk is considered as part of financial and divisional planning and in the development and delivery of corporate strategies. For example, a risk assessment of the IT strategy has been carried out and a set of controls to mitigate the key risks identified put in place. These sound processes help the Council to proactively manage the delivery of its priorities.

- 52** Good partnership working secures service improvement and improves service resilience. For example, through its contract for leisure and cultural services the Council has secured improved facilities, additional funding for arts activities and reduced overall costs. As part of its succession planning, and in recognition of the limited internal development opportunities the Council promotes cross service working opportunities and collaborates with other Essex authorities to provide work placements to help develop staff in areas where skill shortages exist. It recently transferred its housing stock, enabling a programme of major repairs and improvements that would not be possible for the Council to deliver alone. It has worked with a number of voluntary organisations, helping build capacity. This has, for example, ensured the local community transport scheme is now self-supporting. Ensuring resources get utilised effectively supplements the Council's and partners' ability to deliver value for money (VfM) and address local concerns.
- 53** The Council's approach to using its resources ensures it has sufficient resources to deliver its priorities and plans. There are some strengths in the Council's approach, notably its forward planning to fund long-term priorities, securing value for money in new initiatives and attracting external funds. Resources have been built up, since 2003, to meet the costs of the new environmental contracts and to manage the impact of the housing transfer in September 2007. A similar approach has been taken to ensure that resources are available to deliver the new IT strategy. Revenues and capital savings were achieved when the leisure contract was re-let whilst securing improved outcomes. The Council works with partners to achieve efficiency improvements, including the use of joint procurement arrangements such as the Procurement Agency for Essex and the Regional Centre of Excellence. The Council has used its location within the Thames Gateway to secure resources to improve town centres and heritage sites such as the Rayleigh windmill.
- 54** However, the lack of clear outcomes within the corporate plan means that it is hard for the MTFP to identify the overall cost to deliver the corporate plan. Indeed, there is more clarity in the MTFP than in the corporate plan. Routine VfM assessments are only just being introduced. The VfM strategy is still in draft, and although some savings have been achieved, such as flexible working in development control and efficiency savings on the use of bed and breakfast accommodation, the full impact has not yet been identified.

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- 55** Investment, in information communications technology (ICT) and e-government, is providing greater choice and improving access to services. The Council recently achieved level three of the Equalities Standard for Local Government. As part of its ICT strategy the Council is extending the use of online consultation to provide more opportunities for residents to give feedback. The website has translation facilities, and the display can be changed to help those with visual impairment. The access to services strategy and the consultation strategy are focused on those groups who do not normally engage with the Council, including those with a disability, living in rural isolation and the young and old. Mystery shopping, which provides feedback on what it is like to use Council services, includes elements around diversity and equality. Recent developments include a pilot text messaging service for people with a hearing impairment. Good corporate planning makes it easier for residents to access improved services.
- 56** There are good arrangements to ensure staff and members work within the ethical framework. Following external advice the Standards Committee has been strengthened by the appointment of an independent chair, and independent members work with independent members from four neighbouring councils, improving awareness of issues. There are clear officer and member codes of conduct which were adopted in 2007 and have been supported by a training programme. The Standards Committee and the ethical framework have a higher profile as a result and members and staff are more able to implement the framework in practice.

Performance management

- 57** The Council performs adequately in this area. Some elements of the Council's approach to performance management are good, such as the clarity of reporting, and challenge against targets whilst other elements are new and have potential to deliver significant improvements, such as the Performance Assessment Board. However, other areas are only adequate. Target setting, for example, is not clearly aligned to corporate priorities, although it does support general service improvement. Performance and financial reporting is not integrated, but performance and project management is. Performance management within the LSP, whilst adequate, is not sufficiently well developed to ensure that cross cutting issues, which can only be delivered by working in partnership, will be successfully implemented. The Council and LSP are aware of the need to improve this area.
- 58** Councillors and staff are clear on their responsibilities for performance management. The Council's performance management framework clearly explains roles and responsibilities, and this is understood by staff and councillors even though some arrangements are new. Performance information is now discussed every three months by the Executive Board. An officer-led, Performance Assessment Board considers performance management reports before the Executive, examining areas not meeting targets, and challenging service managers over actions they are taking to bring their services back on target. Clarity of roles and responsibilities helps ensure that the Council can take appropriate action to ensure services meet their targets.

- 59 Performance management has led to clear service improvements. The performance reports highlight areas where targets are not being met, and the Council considers appropriate action to bring services back onto target. For example, the time taken to process housing benefits claims was increasing because of an increase in claims. This led to a backlog of claims. Additional resources were identified, in this case processing routine cases off-site using a private contractor, and clear targets set for improvement, clearing outstanding cases within seven weeks. This service is now meeting Council targets. Improvements have also been delivered in other key areas such as speed of processing planning applications, cleanliness of the district and per cent of Council Tax collected.
- 60 Target setting, for service improvement, is still evolving and is not yet consistent across all services. Clear outcome based targets, with clear timescales, are set for key indicators. This helps improve the effectiveness of the performance management system. A series of staff led sessions challenge the ambition of targets, based on benchmarks against similar councils, and help identify targets that are not outcome based, resourced or lack a clear timeline. This has led to improvements in divisional plans, but not all targets have been challenged or reviewed. Some divisional plans still lack clear outcome based targets, having general targets to 'improve' or 'increase', and lack clear timescales in which the improvement will be achieved. Clear and explicit targets are important to communicate what the Council intends to do and help it check that it delivers what it promises. The inconsistencies in target setting hamper the effectiveness of performance management across the whole Council.
- 61 The Council provides clear and accessible information on its performance. The quarterly performance reports are published and available to staff, all councillors and to partners. These reports show trend and performance against target and track completion of action plans and implementation of policies. Reports are also published on the Council's web-site showing indicators included in divisional plans, although this does not include trend or progress against targets. By publishing performance management information, partners and local residents are able to keep track of how the Council is performing against what it said it would do.
- 62 However, performance management reports do not track performance against the Council's objectives, and are not linked to finance. Performance management reports are organised under divisional plans and under four broad headings (clean, green and safe; housing and benefits; planning and council tax). Although an attempt has been made to link these to the Council's priorities, the performance management reporting as it stands does not demonstrate whether the Council has delivered its ambitions. The exclusion of financial reporting alongside the performance reporting hinders the Council's ability to manage performance against the objective of 'excellent, cost effective, frontline services'. The Council's approach is partly a result of the broad objectives and priorities it has adopted. Nevertheless, its ability to maintain its focus on delivering its priorities is weakened by this approach.

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** Arrangements for managing performance, in partnerships, are adequate. Arrangements within the CDRP are good for sharing data and the LSP monitors performance through regular sub-group meetings with the chairs of each block reporting to the LSP Executive. However, as the community strategy action plan lacks clear outcome based targets, the effectiveness of the monitoring is limited, and is not sufficient to manage performance of initiatives being delivered by the Council and its partners in partnership. This fact is recognised by the Council and the LSP who are currently working on improvements. Monitoring with commercial partners is effective and based on clear targets, and service level agreements with the voluntary sector include performance targets, although these are generally inputs (such as the numbers of hours worked) rather than a specific outcome. The Council can currently monitor partnership activity, but it does not always evaluate whether they are achieving the outcomes agreed.
- 64** Staff development and performance is effective. Regular staff appraisals take place and staff are able to suggest service improvements, such as expanding the football and boxing activities for young people. Managers use appraisal sessions to help identify competencies and succession plan to ensure important services are maintained during staff changes. This helps ensure services are resilient and respond quickly to changing circumstances.
- 65** User feedback, complaints and experiences are used well to deliver improvements to services. Formal complaints are reviewed and reported to the Strategy and Partnership Management Team and then to the Executive. The Area Committees have received complaints about local issues, which have been acted on. For example, the East Area Committee received local complaints about the cleanliness, at the weekend, around a new supermarket, and this led to an increase in the frequency of cleaning which resolved the problem. A programme of mystery shopping, carried out in partnership with neighbouring councils, has already led to some improvements. For example, improved information about revenues and benefits and a standardised approach to answering telephones across the Council. This approach to seeking and using feedback ensures the Council remains responsive to the needs of local people.

What has been achieved?

Achievement and improvement

- 66 The Council is performing well in this area. Overall satisfaction with the Council is high, at 62 per cent, which is amongst the top performing 25 per cent of English councils. The Council is amongst the top performing councils, for satisfaction, in a range of areas including: waste collection (88 per cent satisfied); cleanliness (81 per cent satisfied); tenant satisfaction (92 per cent); sports and leisure (67 per cent); and parks and open spaces (82 per cent).
- 67 In 2006/07, a total of 33 per cent of best value performance indicators (from a basket selected by the Audit Commission) were in the top performing 25 per cent. This is equivalent to the average for all English district councils.
- 68 Over the last few years, the Council has maintained services that perform well, while improving poorer performing services. For example, in 2006/07 the time taken to process housing benefits - new claims and change of circumstances - were both below the median level, at 31 days and 16 days respectively. The Council's own monitoring shows that for 2007/08 the speed has improved to 22.6 days and 9.5 days respectively (both unaudited). In 2006/07 the Council achieved Level 1 on the local government Equality standard. It is now at level 3. Areas where performance is poor, such as in the proportion of waste recycled or composted, have clear, explicit action plans to deliver significant improvement - in this case with targets to exceed 55 per cent recycling by 2009/10.
- 69 The Council has worked well with partners to deliver high quality services in a cost effective way. Overall crime rates are very low, and have reduced significantly. Working with a private contractor has delivered significant savings over the running of the leisure and arts centres, whilst increasing investment in the centres. Slow performance in processing revenues and benefits claims has been addressed and the speed of processing planning applications is now amongst the top performing councils.
- 70 In assessing the Council's overall achievements, we have considered the priorities of the Council as published in the Council's corporate plan.

Provide an excellent, cost effective, frontline service for all our customers

- 71 The Council delivers a wide range of high quality frontline services. It achieves high satisfaction rates in most services and although the Commission's overall judgement for value for money is adequate, the Council can demonstrate good value for money in several areas where they have renegotiated contracts, or let new contracts. The Council responds promptly to requests for services, it has recently re-checked its service standards with local people and reviewed documents; for example, local residents helped re-write revenues and benefits forms.

- 72 The Council's leisure centres are high quality and have been improved through investment at low cost overall to the Council. The Council entered a new contract to manage the leisure centres, plus some arts and community facilities. Because of the community consultation before the contract was let, a new centre was constructed in Rayleigh which includes an indoor bowls hall plus outdoor skateboard park. The contract delivered revenue savings of £65,000 a year (a saving of 35 per cent) plus capital savings. During this time satisfaction with the sports and leisure centres increased from 53 per cent (2003/04) to 67 per cent (2006/07) taking the Council into the top performing 25 per cent of English district councils.
- 73 The Council has secured other improvements to frontline services. For example, the Council has contracted out parts of the Revenues and Benefits Service, enabling it to speed up processing of new claims and change in circumstances (both previously performing lower than average), extend opening hours and enable technology to be used, such as piloting voice risk analysis, to reduce fraud. As part of improving access to services, the Council consulted users of its web-site and re-launched with clearer navigation, translation, alternative text size and improved ability to 'transact' with the Council. The needs of specific communities, such as the small BME communities, are taken into account through discussions with community leaders.

Work towards a safer and more caring community

- 74 Work towards a safe and more caring community has been very successful. Overall crime is very low in the district, and crime levels have dropped by 33 per cent per cent since the 2004/05 baseline. This is the largest drop in eastern England, significantly exceeding the target of 13.5 per cent overall crime reduction. The Council and its partners have undertaken a range of actions to achieve the reduction in crime, including establishing no cold calling zones, handy-person scheme to maintain gardens and reduce opportunistic crime, and targeted schemes to reduce car thefts and bike thefts. Crime is low, and people now feel safer.
- 75 Successful action has been taken to reduce anti-social behaviour (ASB). For example, that caused by young people at the Southend Road car park. Working with local residents and the police led to identifying a number of possible solutions. Recycling banks were moved and enclosed to prevent tampering, letters were sent to the parents of young people acting in an anti-social manner and gates that allow access to pushchairs and wheelchairs but not to bikes or motorbikes were installed. A whole range of activities have been arranged for young people. These included the Star partnership, which includes West Ham United Football Club and the PCT, organising a series of football sessions, including five-a-side competitions and more recently boxing, involving circuit training, sparring and work with a punch bag. Many young people have gone on to careers in sports coaching as result. The proportion of people feeling safe after dark has increased by 6 per cent and there were 1,000 fewer victims of crime last year than there were three years ago. The overall reduction in crime, at 33 per cent, has been described as 'monumental' by the government office for the east of England.

- 76 The Council has also taken action to protect the most vulnerable people in the community. It has worked with Essex County Council to turn an old fashioned sheltered housing scheme into affordable rented flats and create a new elderly persons housing complex in Rayleigh. Separate initiatives have improved the Council's response to homelessness. These include increased staffing, a Council funded rent and deposit scheme, dispute mediation and revising the lettings policy to give greater priority to homeless families. The proportion of homeless cases determined within 33 days has improved from 40 per cent in 2005/06 to 98 per cent in 2007/08.

Provide a green and sustainable environment

- 77 The Council has been slow to implement significant initiatives to provide a green and sustainable environment, but has clear, funded robust plans which are now being implemented. The Council recognised, in 2004, that it was lagging behind on recycling. It took action to increase the proportion of waste that was recycled; increasing the amount recycled or composted from 10 per cent in 2004 to 20 per cent in 2007/08. And it started discussions with Essex County Council over options for a completely new service which was always due to start mid-2008. The Council has secured a new contractor and is implementing a new scheme that meets the needs of local people and Essex County Council whilst still delivering high levels of recycling and composting. Smaller waste bins, to encourage waste minimisation, are being distributed, which will be emptied once a fortnight and new bins for kitchen and garden waste, which will be emptied weekly, are also being distributed. The Council has set a target of recycling 55 per cent of household waste during 2009/10.
- 78 Satisfaction with the natural environment is high. In 2006/07, 82 per cent were satisfied with parks and open spaces, and 81 per cent were satisfied with the cleanliness of the district (both amongst the top performing 25 per cent of English districts). The development of Cherry Orchard Jubilee Country Park is increasing biodiversity in the area; six different woodlands are planted with native trees species and a 300 metre lake provides an aquatic environment that also attracts migrating birds.
- 79 The Council has made bold commitments to reduce its own impact on the environment. The Review Committee examined activities that led to emissions of carbon dioxide, and what could be done to reduce these. Ambitious targets, to reduce the amount of carbon dioxide by 30 per cent in five years and by 60 per cent in nine years were proposed and have been adopted by the Council. Actions have already been implemented, for example, new boilers and better heating controls have reduced gas use by 40 per cent. Toilets across the Council offices have been refurbished; waterless urinals, dual flush toilets and new taps have reduced water use by one million litres a year.

Encourage a thriving economy

- 80 The Council understands the needs of local businesses and has developed appropriate services in response. Improvements to some industrial estates have been made as a result of the Council's work to secure funding from TGSE. This has made them more attractive to current and prospective businesses, secured improved tenure and businesses located on these estates report that staff are more motivated and staff retention is easier. Well attended business breakfasts provide information on current local issues and help raise businesses' awareness of the support available. The Council is leading partnership work to expand and publicise the support given to start up businesses through the new Rochford in Business Awards scheduled for 2009.
- 81 There has been a sustained focus on town centre improvement, although the impact of Council's work in this area is limited by the lack of a clear strategic vision for town centres. The Council's long term aim to regenerate Rochford town centre has resulted in a series of improvements including an upgrading of the market square, the development of a new supermarket, mixed residential accommodation and new retail units. In Rayleigh, the Council secured TGSE funding to improve car parking and traffic flow around the town, and to link the car park more appropriately with the town centre. These projects have resulted in specific improvements. However the district still lacks a genuinely strategic plan for the local economy, including clear details on how town centre regeneration contributes to this. The Council is aiming to fill this gap, having committed to funding a major master planning exercise for the town centres linked to the development of the new LDF and a revised Economic Development Strategy; this should provide direction and targets for the future.

Improve the quality of life for people in our district

- 82 The Council has made good progress in this area. Improvements to leisure centres (as detailed in paragraph 72) has had a positive impact on local people, reflected in best quartile levels of resident satisfaction with sports and leisure facilities, and increased numbers of people using the leisure facilities.
- 83 Work to improve housing opportunities is generally progressing well although future plans for the provision of affordable housing are under developed. The transfer of the Council's housing stock to Rochford Housing Association was handled well and has created the capacity to achieve significant improvements to the housing stock including plans to surpass the requirements of the Decent Homes Standard by 2012. The Council has been proactive in identifying sites for affordable housing and has helped to build 155 units in the last four years, despite having no formally adopted target. This is a good achievement in an area where development land is scarce. There are clear targets, as part of the Council's commitment to the Essex LAA, for affordable housing in the future, although the Council and its partners are still developing their strategies to respond to this in the context of the Strategic Housing Needs Assessment.

- 84 The Council provides good support for vulnerable members of the community. Working in partnership with housing associations the Council identified under utilised sheltered housing schemes with outdated accommodation and other available land in both Rayleigh and Rochford. This enabled a 30 bed extra care scheme to be built in Rayleigh, a second stage refuge for women fleeing violence and ten units for those with learning disabilities plus two move on flats in Rochford. Further schemes are under development. Both the extra care places and units for those with learning disability enable vulnerable residents to remain in their communities with appropriate support. The second stage refuge allows women to move on and frees up much needed emergency accommodation.
- 85 The Council contributes well to the delivery of a range of support for older people, helping to fund gardening and handyperson schemes that help to enable users to remain in their own homes. The Rochford Home Maintenance and Adaptation Grant helps improve the properties of people with a disability and has satisfaction levels of 84 per cent.
- 86 The performance of revenues and benefits has improved rapidly following major service changes. The outsourcing of the front office has not only improved processing times, putting the Council in the top quartiles of performance but has increased availability of the service to its customers including Saturdays. Staff retention has been improved and the service has won both Charter Mark, Crystal Mark and is short listed for the IRRV Performance Awards 2008.

Maintain and enhance our local heritage

- 87 The Council has helped achieve some good outcomes in this area. It played a pivotal role in co-ordinating and facilitating the renovation of Rayleigh windmill. This has preserved and enhanced a prominent local landmark, helping to raise the profile of the area and expand the range of tourist attractions. Visitor numbers have increased and partnerships with local and national organisations give the local community direct involvement in the running of the windmill.
- 88 The importance of maintaining the character of the local area is reinforced through a number of schemes. The Council has enabled the preparation of conservation area appraisals for its ten conservation areas. Its annual Design and Heritage Awards help to raise the profile of the area's historic buildings and the Listed Building Grant Scheme aids the preservation of historic buildings.
- 89 The Council has delivered on its long term commitment to improving and expanding public open space. The development of Cherry Orchard Jubilee County Park since 2000 has included planting 28,000 trees and improvements to access and visitor facilities will continue as plans to double the size of the park are delivered. Resident satisfaction with parks and open spaces is high; among the top 25 per cent of performing councils.

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 Rochford District Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 16 to 25 June.
- 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.