Corporate Assessment

Wokingham Borough Council

December 2008

Contents

Introduction

1   Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) is the means by which the Audit Commission fulfils its statutory duty under section 99 of the Local Government Act 2003, to make an assessment, and report on the performance of local authorities. Corporate assessment is one element in the overall assessment that leads to a CPA score and category.

2   The purpose of the corporate assessment is to assess how well the Council engages with and leads its communities, delivers community priorities in partnership with others, and ensures continuous improvement across the range of Council activities. It seeks to answer three headline questions which are underpinned by five specific themes.

- What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?
  - Ambition
  - Prioritisation
- What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?
  - Capacity
  - Performance management
- What has been achieved?
  - Achievement
- Considered against the shared priorities of:
  - sustainable communities and transport;
  - safer and stronger communities;
  - healthier communities;
  - older people; and
  - children and young people.

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

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

Executive summary

5   The Council is performing adequately. Wokingham Borough Council, with its partners, has a clear vision and shared ambitions to improve the quality of life for local people. Key challenges for the area are: to sustain communities where incomes are lower and where rural isolation may impact adversely; to respond to planned housing growth, to provide adequate affordable housing; to support economic prosperity ensuring a good quality of life for all; to tackle congestion, and to reduce fear of crime. The Council and its partners have developed a long-term strategic approach which seeks to tackle these issues and demographic changes. There is more to do to engage with some local minority communities to identify and respond to their needs and aspirations but their understanding of the regional and local context is reasonably good.

6   The vision for the area is translated into priorities. These are generally understood, but a lack of consistent communication has caused uncertainty. The Council and its partners have used feedback from residents and their intelligence on the local area to adopt a long-term approach to issues. Partners have been involved in setting targets within the Local Area Agreement (LAA) to ensure they are realistic. However, targets are not always challenging. For example, a target has been set to reduce the Council's own carbon emissions instead of reducing emissions in the area in support of the ambition for a sustainable quality of life.

7   In order to rise effectively to these challenges the Council has a new and developing approach to community leadership. The Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) has been slow to develop and key stakeholders have found the Council reluctant to engage at a sub regional level to tackle issues. However, through new political and managerial leadership, the Council is facing up to responding to the challenges of the area. Key stakeholders recognise the Council's stronger community focus and welcome its new willingness to engage. This means the Council and its partners are at the early stages of being in a stronger position to focus more effectively on tackling the challenges local people face.

8   Political and managerial leadership are increasingly effective. The current political leadership has a clear commitment to championing the social and economic needs of the area, with a particular emphasis on supporting people who are potentially at risk and vulnerable. Difficult decisions are taken such as to provide social care support to only the most vulnerable citizens. Leading politicians are at the early stages of showing leadership in progressing challenging agendas. Relationships between councillors and officers are developing well in the new culture of openness. The new Chief Executive is working effectively to ensure a clear strategic focus among officers on achieving corporate priorities. This is resulting in a renewed clarity for councillors and senior officers about their respective roles as strategic decision makers and managers.

9　Current capacity is adequate to deliver priorities. In recent years the overarching priority for the Council has been to keep increases in the council tax low. It has successfully driven out inefficiencies and found ways of delivering services at the lowest cost possible. In general, costs are low when compared with other councils. However, the Council has recognised that it does not have the capacity to deliver its priorities in the future. It has very recently completed a fundamental review of services to identify what will be priority and non-priority services for action and investment and started implementing its Transformation Strategy. This is designed to ensure it has sufficient capacity to achieve community ambitions in the future.

10　An established improvement culture results in a good high level approach to performance management. A performance framework is in place but managing and monitoring performance is not yet consistent across the Council. Clear outcome focused targets are not in place to measure outcomes and impacts against all long-term priorities. Councillors' role in performance management is under-developed, with scrutiny not providing effective challenge.

11　Generally, internal processes enhance the Council's capacity to support the delivery of the community ambitions. Financial management is strong and the Council's approach to achieving value for money is good. Partnership working is productive and enhances capacity well. Information systems, risk management and project management are adequate. Workforce planning is at the early stages of development, but the Council is tackling this through its work on business transformation. However, support for councillors to enable them to carry out their strategic roles is weak.

12　The Council's approach to ensuring fair and equitable access to services is inadequate. Equality impact assessments are of variable quality and some key policies and schemes are not in place. The Council and its partners' knowledge of the needs of some potentially vulnerable people and of less affluent communities is limited. It does not engage well with some minority communities. The Council's focus on improving access to services is stronger, such as through its Customer First programme. However, at present the Council risks its ambitions and priorities not being wholly owned by all key stakeholders and cannot assure equalities and diversity in the delivery of its services.

Executive summary

13   Many residents experience generally good quality services but some potentially vulnerable and at risk communities do not share in quality of life improvements. Educational attainment is good, but for some vulnerable children and young people outcomes vary from good to inadequate. The contribution of the Council and its partners to improving support and provision for children at risk or requiring safeguarding is inadequate. Local people enjoy generally good health, but there is more to do with partners to ensure targeted opportunities for people who would benefit most. Crime levels are low but initiatives have had little impact on reducing the fear of crime which remains disproportionately high. Limited progress has been made in balancing the housing market and securing affordable housing to help meet housing needs in the area. There remains more to do to tackle congestion and increase use of public transport in the area. Recycling and waste management are good. Work to respond to the needs of some vulnerable communities, such as people with learning disabilities, is delivering significant outcomes for individuals. Effective engagement with older people is securing a strong strategic approach and delivering good outcomes for people in later life to ensure an active and inclusive community.

Areas for improvement

14   The Council should improve its user focus. It should:

- carry out work to understand better the needs of all communities, including vulnerable and potentially marginalised communities; and

- use this understanding to inform all future service planning and delivery to tackle inequalities within the borough and to ensure a consistent and integrated approach for all the activities of the Council.

This is important to ensure fair and equitable access to services, to ensure services match the needs and aspirations of all local people and strengthen the Council and its partners approach to building stronger and more cohesive communities.

15   The Council should continue to drive forward the development of a culture of inclusion and openness. It should work with all key stakeholders, such as councillors, staff, partners and local communities, to develop shared understanding and mutual respect, including improving understanding of corporate priorities.

16   The Council should continue its fundamental review of how it is going to deliver its contribution to community ambitions, using this to: assess how it will deliver its own corporate priorities and build appropriate future capacity to do so; define its approach to strategic workforce management; and bring together a programme for corporate improvement and continued modernisation.

17   The Council should continue to develop its community leadership. It should strengthen its outward focus within the sub region on tackling key challenges facing local people. In doing so, it needs to improve the effectiveness of its key strategic partnerships, especially the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP), including ensuring clear and explicit roles within its partnership arrangements.

18   The Council should focus on ensuring performance management and service monitoring is consistent across all services and activities so that councillors and managers have a comprehensive picture of performance. This is particularly important in areas of poor performance, such as safeguarding children and young people. This will support sound decision making and a focus on delivering improved outcomes for local people.

Summary of assessment scores

Headline questions	Theme	Score*
What is the Council, together with its partners trying to achieve?	Ambition	2
	Prioritisation	2
What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?	Capacity	2
	Performance Management	2
What has been achieved?	Achievement	2
Overall Corporate Assessment Score **		2
* Key to scores		
1 - Below minimum requirements - **inadequate performance** 2 - At only minimum requirements - **adequate performance** 3 - Consistently above minimum requirements - **performing well** 4 - Well above minimum requirements - **performing strongly**		

**** Rules for determining the overall Corporate Assessment score**

Scores on five themes	Overall Corporate Assessment score
Two or more themes with a score of 4 None less than a score of 3	4
Three or more with a score of 3 or more None less than a score of 2	3
Three or more themes with a score of 2 or more	2
Any other combination	1

Context

The locality

19 Wokingham lies within the Thames Valley, approximately 30 miles west of London and is part of the former administrative county of Berkshire. Its main towns are Wokingham, Woodley, Winnersh and Earley. The rest of the area is rural and semi-rural with several smaller towns and villages located in an attractive natural environment. In these more rural areas population density is low and delivering accessible services in this environment is a major challenge for the Council and its partners.

20 The borough has a population of 153,800 people (Office of National Statistics mid-2006 population estimate) which is expected to rise to 162,300 by 2029. It has the highest population when compared with neighbouring unitary councils of Bracknell Forest, West Berkshire, Slough, Reading and Windsor and Maidenhead. Most people live in the three main towns and within the suburbs adjoining Reading. The population has grown steadily over the past ten years. Ethnic diversity is slightly below the national average but above the regional average. People from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities make up 10 per cent of the population. These communities have increased in recent years due to migrant workers mainly from Eastern Europe.

21 The population structure reflects national trends with low birth rates and increased life expectancy. There is an increasing elderly population which is projected to grow further over the next 20 years. Currently, approximately 32 per cent of the local population is aged 50 years and over, and this is predicted to rise to 36 per cent in ten years. Twenty per cent are expected to be 65 years and over. This places demands on the Council and its partners to meet the needs and expectations of people in later life.

22 Transport links are good. The area has excellent links to London, Heathrow airport and the motorway network, making it an attractive location for business. IT and the communications and pharmaceutical sectors dominate the sub-regional economy. Major international companies, such as Oracle, Microsoft, ICL and Prudential, are located within the borough, as is part of the University of Reading.

23 The quality of life is good and improving for most local people. Educational attainment at all key stages of the national curriculum is good and among the highest nationally. However, educational achievement is lower among looked after children and some BME communities. Crime levels are among the lowest in the country. The British Crime Survey (BCS) shows that there were 32 offences per 1,000 population in the area in 2007/08. This is a 19.5 per cent reduction since 2006/07 and is well below the national average of 48. Fear of crime remains a concern for local people. Levels of deprivation are well below the national average. Life expectancy at birth is above the national average and health indicators are better than nationally. Death rates from heart disease, stroke, cancer and smoking are all below the national average. There are low levels of fuel poverty.

24　The area is generally prosperous with a predominantly affluent and highly qualified population. Unemployment is extremely low as 97 per cent of local people are economically active. Many people work in banking and finance and average household income is high. Car ownership is the third highest level nationally with over 40 per cent of households owning 2 or more cars. High levels of car use and being an attractive location for business creates challenges for the Council and its partners in terms of tackling congestion and adverse environmental impacts.

25　However, not all communities share in the area's high quality of life and prosperity. Pockets of deprivation exist within neighbourhoods in Shinfield North, Shinfield South, Bulmershe and Whitegates. However these do not fall within the top 20 per cent most deprived neighbourhoods nationally. Crime is higher in Shinfield North, Shinfield South and Norreys. These areas have the highest percentage of adults on out of work benefits and the lowest incomes. In addition there is a gap in life expectancy of six and a half years between low and higher income groups. Given the area's age profile and increased life expectancy generally, there is a risk of existing health and social inequalities increasing, leading to poor community capacity and low aspirations.

26　Property prices are very high and in 2007 were the second highest in Berkshire. This is a contributing factor to recruitment and retention issues for the Council and its partners. In 2007 the house price to average income ratio in Wokingham was 8.44, considerably higher than the national average of 7.26. Almost 84 per cent of households are owner occupied with 46 per cent living in detached homes. There are significant shortages of key worker and affordable housing, which impacts negatively on families, young people and people with low incomes. As a result, many people commute to work from outside the borough. This added to people who commute out of the borough to London and neighbouring areas increases congestion and pollution.

27　In common with many areas in the South East the borough faces pressures for economic and housing development due to its proximity to London and attractive natural environment. Over the past 30 years, 20,000 new houses have been built. This development supports the view expressed in the Sustainable Community Strategy to maintain the vibrancy of town centres. However, it is in sharp contrast with a clearly expressed desire in the strategy to protect and preserve the character of the area and enable towns and villages to maintain their identity.

Context

The Council

28 Wokingham Borough Council was created in 1998 as one of the six unitary councils formed from the Royal County of Berkshire and the local district councils, following local government reorganisation. The Council is made up of 54 councillors representing 25 wards and has been Conservative controlled since 2002. The Conservative group has 44 seats and the Liberal Democrats 10.

29 The current Leader was elected to the position following the elections in May 2008 after the previous Leader stood down. The executive structure was subsequently redesigned. The decision making Cabinet is made up of the Leader, two Deputy Leaders and nine portfolio holders responsible for children's services; community development; community regeneration and safety; corporate services; council budgets; environment and PR; highways and transport local and regional planning; and social care. There is an Overview and Scrutiny committee and a Health Overview and Scrutiny committee enabling a broader range of councillors to get involved in policy making decisions. In addition a range of non-executive and regulatory committees cover, for example, development control, governance and standards, and audit functions.

30 The Council employs over 2,279 staff, inclusive of schools. It is managed by the Chief Executive who has been in post since January 2008. She is supported by six general managers for policy and partnerships; place and neighbourhood services; business services; strategic priorities (who is also the Deputy Chief Executive); children's services; and community care. The Chief Executive, general managers, and the manager for governance and democratic services (who is also the Monitoring Officer) make up the Strategic Leadership Board, a newly formed corporate management team which has been meeting since June 2008. Currently portfolio and organisational structures are not aligned.

31 The Council's gross revenue spending for 2008/09 is £263 million, with a net budget of £97 million. The Council is one of the lowest funded local councils nationally. It has one of the lowest budgeted spend per head of population and Band D council tax is above average when compared with nearest neighbours. Wokingham's council tax increased by 4.9 per cent in 2008/09. In 2008/09 the Council approved a capital programme of £36 million. This is intended for schemes across the Council including highways, schools, tenant properties and extra care housing

32 In 2002, the Wokingham Borough Strategic Partnership, the local strategic partnership, published a ten-year community strategy for Wokingham. In 2005, following work to refresh the strategy and its action plan, a revised action plan was launched in 2007. In the autumn 2007 work began to develop a second Local Area Agreement (LAA) which was signed in May 2008.

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

Ambition

33   The Council is performing adequately in this area. With partners, it has developed clear ambitions for the area, though these are not supported with consistently challenging targets. Ambitions are based on ongoing engagement with local communities and a broad understanding of the area and its underlying needs. Major partners share these ambitions and there is good support for the Council's medium-term vision. There is more to do to understand all community needs such as through better engagement with less affluent people and some vulnerable communities. The Council's community leadership is new and developing.

34   The Council's vision and ambitions with its partners are clear. The ambitions are articulated in the Sustainable Community Strategy 2002/12, which was refreshed in 2007 and are reflected in the recently agreed LAA. They build on the earlier ambitions the Council and its partners set out in the first community strategy and have formed the basis of partnership working since 2002. The four community ambitions, developed in consultation with key partners, are: balancing economic prosperity with a sustainable quality of life; being a community where everyone feels safe, welcome and respected; being a healthy and well-educated community; and supporting and caring for people that need help. In February 2008 the Council developed a new vision for the borough of 'A great place to live and work, where residents feel valued and the Council promotes economic growth with good quality of life and opportunity for all'. Partners have endorsed this vision as it captures well what all partners working together are trying to achieve.

35   Ambitions are not consistently challenging or SMART (specific measurable achievable realistic and timed). They set a clear agenda for partners to work together to improve the quality of life in Wokingham and performance against many of the ambitions is already high with many local people enjoying a good quality of life. But the Council and its partners lack a range of SMART targets in the Sustainable Community Strategy to measure success in delivering an improved quality of life for less affluent and more vulnerable people in the area. Not all LAA targets are challenging. For example, the Council has selected an indicator to reduce its own carbon emissions instead of a more challenging one of reducing emissions in the area, so reducing its potential achievement.

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

36 The Council and its partners have used data well to inform their broad understanding of the local context. The strategy was refreshed using an analysis of intelligence on and research into the area. For example consultants produced a State of Berkshire report which provides an analysis across all six unitary councils in Berkshire using environmental, social and economic indicators. The findings of such work have been used to plan to tackle the challenges local people face. In addition it has worked with neighbouring councils to develop a housing market assessment and a key worker study. Use of data enables the Council and its partners to be confident that the ambitions reflect a general understanding of local needs and the area.

37 Effective consultation and engagement with local people means that ambitions are based on identified needs. A range of approaches such as surveys and community forums are used well to understand local expectations, although there is a lack of explicit feedback mechanisms in place. The Council and its partners engage particularly well with older people and people with learning disabilities. Older People's Forums offer good opportunities for older people to share their views with the Council. As a result of the Council listening well to this community the recently agreed Older People's Strategy is soundly based on their views.

38 There is more to do to understand the needs of less affluent people and some vulnerable communities. The Council and its partners' knowledge of the needs of some potentially vulnerable people and the needs of less affluent communities are insufficiently clear. The Council and the Wokingham Borough Strategy Partnership are committed to stronger neighbourhood working and have developed six neighbourhoods within the borough to inform decision making and service planning. Although this work is in the early stages, at present there is no structured profile information to identify the needs of these neighbourhoods. As a result, the Council and its partners cannot be confident that resources are and will be appropriately focused.

39 Community leadership is new and developing. Under the Council's leadership the LSP has been slow to develop and can demonstrate few outcomes for the local community. However, the Council has recently worked with partners on strengthening the partnership's effectiveness although it is too early for any outcomes from this work. The Council has lacked a high profile in the sub region and has not engaged fully in tackling regional challenges, such as on planned new housing, climate change and transport. This is gradually changing. Despite local opposition, eighteen months ago it released longer-term sites for housing, recognising the need for more and better quality housing growth in the area. The new political leadership is more community focused and willing to engage in sub regional working to champion the interests of Wokingham communities. Partners and staff welcome the developing culture of openness and willingness to listen and communicate. As a result, the Council is becoming better placed to help shape the future of the area to support planned growth.

40   Positive relationships with partners are delivering community ambitions. Waste management is good through an effective partnership with the neighbouring councils in Reading and Bracknell Forest. Improved partnership working with the Primary Care Trust and the voluntary sector has resulted in a tripartite Compact to shape working relationships. Work with the private sector on the redevelopment of the Winnersh Triangle is ambitious. This project links sustainable building practice, improved public transport and environmental landscaping in support of ambitions for 'balancing economic prosperity with a sustainable quality of life'. Productive partnership working and improving relationships are contributing to effective local service delivery.

Prioritisation

41   The Council is performing adequately in this area. It has used its understanding of local needs and demographic trends and national priorities to set local priorities. However, there is uncertainty among stakeholders about priorities. In recent years, achieving value for money and efficiency has been a clear priority. Difficult decisions are taken in support of corporate priorities. The Council now recognises that it faces increased pressure on resources. It is carrying out a fundamental review, designed to enable it to deliver the overall ambitions through refining and refocusing its priority actions. Some key strategies and plans are not yet agreed, and there are weaknesses in the corporate plan in terms of consistency of target setting and clarity of outcomes sought.

42   Corporate priorities reflect adequately the general needs and context of the area. These balance national and local priorities and are based on consultation findings, performance information and some engagement with potentially vulnerable people in the area. The 12 high level objectives of the previous Corporate Plan 2004/07 contributed to the delivery of the community strategy ambitions. They focused, for example, on value for money; modernising the Council and services; tackling crime and the fear of crime; and keeping the borough moving. High level priorities have been refocused in the Corporate Plan 2008/18 and now are: sound finances and value for money; excellent children's services and skills for all; better health for all and support for vulnerable people; a cleaner and greener local environment; keeping the borough moving; sustainable, quality development; safer and stronger communities; and keeping the customer satisfied.

43   The Council has had a sustained focus on achieving value for money and efficiency. In the last three years the overarching priority for the Council has been to keep increases in the council tax low. It has worked hard to drive out inefficiencies and find ways of delivering services at the lowest cost possible, such as through procurement and a business process review. However, in applying its rigorous approach to efficiency, the Council did not focus explicitly on community benefits and outcomes. This is now being tackled.

44 Financial planning maintains a good focus on delivering priorities. The Medium Term Financial Plan is linked to community ambitions and the corporate plan through the Council's strategic planning framework. Resources are clearly allocated to priorities with a robust process in place for assessing VfM and revenue and capital growth bids. Additional resources have been allocated to prevention services for older people in line with the corporate prevention strategy. Partnership resources, from the Council, voluntary sector and health agencies, are used effectively to support a cross-sectoral and cross-service approach to supporting independence. Partnership funding supports extra care housing, befriending services and financial advocacy services. Resources are used well to deliver priorities.

45 The Council takes difficult decisions in support of its priorities. For example, in support of its priority of 'excellent children's services and skills for all' it is closing the poorly attended Ryeish Green School. This is enabling it to refocus resources on other schools to maintain or improve standards. In 2007, the Council took the decision to refocus resources to support the most vulnerable people in the area by changing the Fair Access to Care Services (FACS) threshold to support those with 'critical' needs only. All adults receiving social care services were reassessed. This resulted in services being removed or reduced from some service users who were given access to alternative preventative services more appropriate to their needs. The Council worked hard with partners to ensure people were not excluded or put at risk. This resulted in savings of over £600,000 in 2007/08.

46 Priorities are being used effectively to set an agenda for action. Although the new corporate priorities were only agreed in February 2008, the Council is now defining specific priority and non-priority areas to decide what the Council will stop doing. This work is being carried out so that it can ensure that future efficiency targets do not detrimentally affect key services and so that it is making best use of resources to achieve its ambitions. It has recognised that it has inadequate resources to achieve its current priorities and maintain existing levels of service. It is taking appropriate action to ensure resources are used to tackle what is most important to local people.

47 Priorities are generally understood but a lack of systematic communication has caused uncertainty. In developing the new corporate plan underlying principles emerged. The new leadership has further refined these principles into three unwritten strategic approaches or 'service strategies'. These are: a focus on prevention; the personalisation of services giving choice to the customer; and 'end to end' or neighbourhood based services. Councillors and senior staff generally have a common understanding of these principles but interpretations vary and there is no formal statement. Staff and other key stakeholders are unclear because the Council has yet to involve them in defining how these principles inform and link with the explicit corporate priorities. As a result, the Council risks being unable to maintain a strong focus on what matters most to local people.

48   Strategies and plans are not robust or comprehensive. The review of the previous corporate plan has not informed the development of the current one as it was carried out six months after the new corporate plan was drafted. In addition some strategies are new or not yet agreed, such as on health and well-being, sustainability and economic development. Not all action plans are in place. The Council missed meeting its target to revise its housing strategy, which is still in draft, due to staff vacancies. However, its action plan is up-to-date and monitored regularly. Not all priorities in the new corporate plan have outward focused, challenging targets. For example the priority of 'a cleaner and greener local environment' is defined at a high level as seeking to lessen the impact of climate change and providing genuine choice in work/life balance. However, there are no cross-cutting measures in place to demonstrate to local people how well the Council and its partners are doing in promoting work/life balance across the borough. As a result the Council cannot be confident it has appropriate mechanisms in place to assess the delivery of corporate priorities based on community ambitions.

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

Capacity

49 The Council is performing adequately in this area. There is strengthened political and managerial leadership and councillors and officers are clear about their roles and responsibilities. But mechanisms to support decision making are not fully effective and not all LSP members are clear about roles and responsibilities. Support for councillors to enable them to carry out their strategic roles is weak. Current capacity is adequate to deliver priorities and work is now underway to ensure the Council can deliver in the future. A strong efficiency culture ensures that the Council delivers good value for money for its services and it is using partnerships well to increase capacity. There is an inadequate approach to equalities and diversity but work is now underway to improve access to services.

50 Councillors and officers are clear about their roles and responsibilities. Strengthened political and managerial leadership has recently created a new culture of openness and freedom where managers and staff feel empowered and enthusiastic about contributing to changes in the Council. The new Leader and Chief Executive have worked hard to provide a renewed clarity for senior officers and councillors about their respective roles as managers and strategic decision makers. The Chief Executive has created a new leadership team, the Strategic Leadership Board, and redefined officer roles. The annual business plan identifies officers accountable for the delivery of corporate priorities. This helps to ensure that priorities are delivered effectively.

51 Risk and project management are satisfactory. The risk management plan is good and there is a history of effective risk management. The current risk management plan is not aligned to the Council's new priorities. Work is planned to tackle this. Project management procedures and skills are improving. Key improvement projects, such as Customer First and major capital projects, are performance managed effectively with appropriate reporting arrangements in place. In addition, the Council has increased its capacity for ensuring sound project management by creating a team to support major corporate projects and programmes. This has helped to successfully deliver key projects such as the building of the new Addington special school. This is important in a time of significant change.

52 Financial management is strong and there is a culture of efficiency and good value for money. In general, costs are low compared with other councils and council tax increases have historically been low. Good processes deliver efficiencies. For example, by using expertise in procurement, process re-engineering and alternative forms of service delivery, the Council achieved cost reductions of almost £2 million in 2006/07 and nearly £2.5 million in 2007/08 on its social care budget. It achieved this through the development of preventative services, enhanced procurement practice in domiciliary care and the rigorous challenging of budget growth bids. In recognition of rising demand for services due to demographic changes and projected reductions in revenue as set out in the Medium Term Financial Plan, the Council is in the process of a further focussing exercise to determine how best to use its limited resources in its priority areas. Resources are used as effectively as possible to deliver local priorities.

53 Access to services is adequate and improving. Information and communication technology (ICT) is used well to aid easier communication with the Council including interactive maps and online planning applications and streetlamp fault reporting. It has worked with people with disabilities to improve accessibility. The Council has used capital funding to install ramps, accessible toilets, automated entrance doors, hearing loop systems and improved fire safety equipment for staff and visitors with sensory impairments. The Council's Customer First project aims to improve access by streamlining the approach to dealing with customer queries on the phone, in person and via the internet. Reasonable progress is being made to ensure that any barriers to services are removed.

54 Staff and managers are committed and enthusiastic. For example, the 2007 staff survey showed that 79 per cent of respondents agreed that they were encouraged to use their initiative and their skills. Managers across the Council are enthusiastic about the current changes that the new leadership team is making. However, staff morale varies, because of weaknesses in communication. Staff feel that they need to be consulted more about changes that affect them. The Council has more to do to improve engagement and communication with staff and managers across the organisation, especially during major change.

55 A recent organisational restructure has strengthened senior management capacity. But the Council lacks an up-to-date human resources strategy and finds it difficult to compete in the local labour market. It has launched a transformation programme which includes developing workforce competencies needed in the future but this is at an early stage. Workforce planning is embryonic with different services approaching it in different ways so there is not a consistent picture across the Council of current skills, capacity and gaps. The Council is not working systematically with neighbouring authorities or other public sector or voluntary organisations to develop joint workforce plans. As a result there is more to do to maximise its people capacity to deliver improved outcomes.

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

56 Relationships with partners are effective and increasing capacity. There are effective working relationships with the PCT. And there are some examples of joint working with neighbouring councils, for example, on a private finance initiative with Reading, Bracknell Forest and a waste contractor to deal with waste collection and disposal. Working relationships with the voluntary sector are well developed in some areas of the Council, notably community care. Voluntary sector organisations provide a range of services to local people and generally feel valued by the Council. Effective partnership working is delivering appropriate local services.

57 Key stakeholders are unclear about the roles and responsibilities within the LSP. Management arrangements are complex with an overarching board and two levels of delivery structure. External consultants are currently reviewing these arrangements to ensure a better structure and their findings are being discussed. Membership is representative of all key partners but there is confusion about who is responsible for what, particularly over accountability for actions that are not part of the LAA. At present there is a risk to the achievement of community ambitions.

58 Support for councillors to enable them to carry out their strategic roles is weak. There are insufficient development opportunities for councillors. The Council provides basic induction training for new councillors and specific training for particular committee roles. But no opportunities are available to develop skills in, for example, performance management, safeguarding issues, or equalities. This makes it more difficult for councillors to perform in their strategic roles.

59 Mechanisms to support effective decision-making are not fully effective but this is changing. The Council effectively delegates decisions to executive councillors and to officers, and decisions of individual Cabinet councillors are taken in public. The Council recognises that scrutiny has been ineffective. A recent review has developed new arrangements and these are being implemented. Until very recently, the executive met before full council for an hour. This has changed giving more time for debate and more transparency. The Council has changed its standards committee. An independent member chairs the standards committee and is considering raising its profile by, for example, visiting parish councils.

60 The Council's approach to equalities and diversity is inadequate. Equality impact assessments are of variable quality. There has been some good work to tackle access to services for disabled people. But there are not policies and schemes to deal with age, sexual orientation and faith. The Council is currently at Level 1 of the Local Government Equalities Standard - most unitary councils are at Level 2 and above. It has plans to tackle this and has set up an equalities champions group. However, it is currently behind the pace of the best performing councils and cannot assure equalities and diversity in the delivery of its services.

Performance management

61 The Council is performing adequately in this area. It has a performance framework in place and an established improvement culture. There is a good approach to high level performance management in the Council with effective monitoring, reporting and action to improve performance against Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs). This has helped to drive successful past and current performance in achieving an above average number of BVPIs in the best 25 per cent of all councils. However, clear outcome focused targets are not yet in place for all long-term priorities. Performance management and service monitoring is not consistent and scrutiny has limited impact.

62 Performance reporting is good and improving. The Council is introducing a new ICT system for collecting, recording and reporting high level performance information. Performance reports generated from this system are good quality, well focused using an easily understood balanced scorecard approach and have clear links to financial performance. This gives the Executive and Senior Leadership Board good knowledge of high level performance issues. Local people are kept abreast of the Council's performance through effective communication. The Council's Wokingham Borough News enables local people to assess how well the Council is delivering against community priorities.

63 The Council uses knowledge about performance effectively to improve services. This has included for example, successful targeted work to improve the revenues and benefits service, community safety and planning services. Housing services are currently under a regime of intensive improvement focus, but it is too early to see the impact of this. A system of output based reviews is used successfully to challenge and improve performance in delivering value for money. Effective arrangements are in place to monitor and respond to customer complaints. There are appropriate mechanisms to report and deal with complaints and lessons are learned, shared and lead to action. This includes, for example, improvements made to waste collection procedures which in turn improved customer satisfaction.

64 The Council has an incomplete picture of service performance. Links between corporate and service performance management are weak. A dedicated Policy and Performance Team manage corporate performance, but this team has had little influence on service performance management. The Corporate Plan sets some realistic targets aligned to corporate priorities and there is a link between these priorities, departmental service plans and individual staff objectives. Individual officer performance is managed effectively through the staff appraisal system. Although the Council has an appropriate corporate template for service planning, service plans are inconsistent, vary in quality and usefulness and have insufficient focus on performance. The Council is developing more local performance and critical indicators. It has also joined a benchmarking club to enable it to better compare its performance regionally and nationally with other councils. These current gaps in knowledge make it more difficult for managers and councillors to gain a full picture of performance.

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

65 Service monitoring is not clear or consistent in all areas and some service areas are not monitored effectively. The presentation of service performance monitoring data is not clear, for example in Children's Services. Performance monitoring procedures have not been effective in the monitoring, audit and management oversight systems for children's social work and assessments. This is now being improved.

66 Scrutiny and councillor challenge to performance is ineffective. This is improving with support from the new leadership of the Council, strengthened membership of scrutiny committees and training of councillors. Councillors are becoming clearer about the function and the need to change, but new arrangements are not yet agreed or implemented. The Council's scrutiny committees have had little impact in improving performance. For example, a recent scrutiny review of anti-social behaviour was poorly supported, had inadequate access to information, and as a result failed to meet its objectives. Health overview and scrutiny has been more effective, for example, in its review of health priorities. Scrutiny committees receive quarterly performance reports but there is little evidence of them using these to challenge areas of under performance. Absence of this kind of challenge inhibits improvement.

67 The performance management framework for the new LAA provides an effective basis for partnership performance management of the delivery of shared priorities. The new ICT performance management system, shared with the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service, is being used effectively to monitor and report LAA outcomes. Recent improvements have been made to the performance management of community safety through the local Crime and Disorder Partnership. However, shared performance management of other outcomes driven by the Wokingham Borough Strategic Partnership and of the partnership itself is underdeveloped. The Council and partners have inconsistent knowledge of the impact of the partnership.

68 The Council and partners have not yet developed indicators or set targets to measure outcomes and success in its longer term vision and priorities. Key quality of life priorities outlined in the Sustainable Community Strategy and Corporate Plan such as 'keeping the borough moving, better health for all and support for vulnerable people and excellent children's services and skills for all' are not yet translated into clear outcome focused indicators. Without these the Council and partners are unable to define and quantify the impacts and benefits that local people can expect from its investment in these priorities.

What has been achieved?

69   Overall the Council is performing adequately in this area. It can show some achievement across national priority areas and some outcomes against its previous corporate priorities as a result of its efforts with partners. Resident satisfaction is good, with 55 per cent of residents satisfied with the Council overall which is above the national average. Thirty four per cent of performance indicators are above average and compare with the best performance nationally. Levels of educational attainment at all stages are good and among the best nationally. However, audited performance data for 2007/08 shows that the rate of improvement based on national performance indicators has slowed and the Council's performance is falling behind the best performing councils. Only 58 per cent of performance indicators have improved from the previous year, below the national average of 63 per cent. When comparing performance over the last three years only 61 per cent of indicators have improved which is below the national average range of 66 to 68 per cent.

70   The Council has made little progress against some priorities. Although most actions in the previous corporate plan were achieved, many of these were internally focused. As a result they had little impact on improving quality of life. Outcomes are unclear from the Council and its partners' investment in building more cohesive communities through neighbourhood working and tackling health and well-being issues. Fear of crime remains disproportionately high compared with actual levels of crime. Use of public transport remains low with levels of car use still high. Progress on building appropriate affordable houses in the area has been slow and contributes to issues of staff recruitment and retention, as well as adversely affecting low income families.

71   The Council is delivering some quality of life improvements for local people. Achievements that local people would recognise reflect national agendas and local priorities as the result of the Council's focus and work with partners. Key achievements include: high levels of recycling and composting; better access to services for children and their families and carers through neighbourhood based services; and developing highly targeted and personalised services for people with learning disabilities enabling them to lead fuller and more independent lives. Many people already enjoy a good quality of life. Road safety is good, crime is low and there are high levels of good health.

72   Actions with partners on tackling concerns and inequalities across the area have delivered quality of life improvements in some deprived communities. Better support for families and environmental improvements has meant a better quality of life for some people living in deprived communities. Through a targeted programme in Winnersh, significant investment has led to improved community facilities and services. Many achievements are jointly owned with partners.

What has been achieved?

Sustainable communities and transport

73 The Council is starting to define its role in relation to economic development and is working with partners to redevelop Wokingham town centre. Some affordable houses have been delivered, although progress has been slow. The right balance of tenure mix has not been achieved as more shared ownership houses have been delivered at the expense of social rented housing. Work towards meeting the decent homes standard in its own stock and the private sector is weak. Performance on waste management and recycling is good and improving. Traffic congestion is a significant issue locally. There are very high levels of car ownership, poor satisfaction with public transport and the Council's efforts to change behaviours have been limited.

74 The Council's contribution to promoting and supporting a sustainable economy is under-developed. Historically, economic development has not been a priority for the Council because of a perception that it would lead to increased numbers of housing and traffic congestion. The Council's view has changed and it has identified economic development as a priority. It is providing strong leadership to redevelop Wokingham town centre to enhance retail facilities and build on the attractiveness of the town. However, it has yet to clarify its role in supporting the local economy, how this links to other priorities, such as reducing environmental impacts and what it wishes to achieve through work with partners.

75 Success in supporting an effective housing market is limited. The Council has developed an approach to shared ownership to allow low income households access to shared ownership properties. However, its contribution to meeting local housing need has been limited. It has failed to meet its target to ensure that 26 per cent of housing development is affordable as it has delivered only 415 affordable houses in the last three years, approximately 20 per cent. In response, it has changed its planning requirements to reduce the thresholds at which developers need to provide affordable housing contributions in the future. Currently the tenure mix is inappropriate. The Council's needs analysis shows that there is a need for 70 per cent social rented affordable housing but currently less than 30 per cent are social rented. Progress in seeking to meet housing needs is slow.

76 The Council has not taken appropriate action to meet the decent homes standard in either its own stock or the private sector. Information on the condition of local housing is out of date and inaccurate. This means that the Council is uncertain how much of its own stock meets the standard. The Council is now in the process of acquiring the data to improve its knowledge. It has not conducted a private sector housing condition survey since 1994 so currently outdated information is being used to base its work to improve conditions in the private sector.

77   The Council is working well to achieve high quality design but there is more to do to maintain attractive public spaces. Planning powers are used well to deliver high quality development. The Council has published a residential design guide to ensure high quality housing development. A recent housing development for key workers received a Green Apple award for its environmental credentials. Levels of littering and fly tipping are improving and the Council and its partners has worked well with local communities to carry out neighbourhood clean ups. However, resident satisfaction with the cleanliness of the area is below the national average.

78   Waste management is effective. The Re3 project, a partnership with a waste contractor and neighbouring councils, is delivering improving recycling and composting rates and performance is among the best nationally. The Council recycles or composts 37 per cent of rubbish. But performance on the amount of waste collected is deteriorating with the Council collecting more rubbish this year than it did last year and slipping from being well above average compared nationally, to now only just above average.

79   The Council is working to improve its environmental credentials and gradually promote environmental issues to the wider community. For example, it has installed solar panels at The Hawthorns primary school, reducing energy use and costs and providing a useful educational resource. The Council is seeking to reduce its electricity use by 5 per cent by 2011 and is working on reducing its carbon footprint. However, it lacks a challenging target to reduce emissions across the borough.

80   Efforts to promote sustainable transport have been weak. The Council recognises that congestion is an issue for local people. However, it has not taken many steps to encourage people out of their cars as it does not consider this is realistic due to the lack of viable public transport options and the high levels of car ownership. The Council now recognises that it is important to tackle this for future housing development where transport hubs and options will be considered. The Council is taking some steps to reduce congestion in the Borough. It has worked with a bus company to improve a rural bus service and is working with Reading Borough Council on improvements to a junction on the M4. It has also piloted safer routes to school and school bus scheme. The conditions of roads and footpaths in the Borough have improved and are among the best nationally. There is more to do to encourage people to change their behaviour and to promote alternatives to car use.

What has been achieved?

Safer and stronger communities

81 The Council works effectively with partners in building safer and stronger communities. It has recognised this as a key priority for local people, particularly to reduce anti-social behaviour, crime and the fear of crime. Crime levels are relatively low, although the fear of crime remains disproportionately high. Neighbourhood working is investing in building stronger and more cohesive communities but outcomes from this work are unclear.

82 The Council and its partners tackle crime successfully. Wokingham has average levels of crime compared to similar councils for most types of crime and it is better than average in tackling the most serious violent and vehicle crime. According to the British Crime Survey (BCS) there were 32 offences per 1,000 population in Wokingham in 2007/08. This represents a 19.5 reduction in offences since 2006/07 well below the national average of 48 and, in terms of annual reduction, the best performance in its Home Office family group. The overall level of crime in Wokingham fell by 18 per cent between 2003/04 and 2007/08. As a result, Wokingham is a relatively safe area to live compared to England as a whole.

83 Targeted initiatives to address crime and disorder are effective. Neighbourhood and community policing has been implemented along with Council funded community wardens who work with the Police Community Support Officers. The Council and its partners provide a range of projects to act as diversionary activities and prevent offending, for example a street games initiative successfully involves potential young offenders. The Council and its partners respond well to reported instances of anti-social behaviour. This includes targeted community development projects and effective working with schools to address anti-social behaviour and to help young people understand its impact. There have been successes in dealing with antisocial behaviour for example, by installing pop-up bollards in a car park, a graffiti wall and neighbourhood traffic speed monitoring.

84 Partnership capacity to build safer and stronger communities has improved in most areas. The Audit Commission inspection of community safety in 2007 concluded that fear of crime was too high and the Council's focus on this insufficient. The Community Safety Partnership has been re-organised under new leadership and a Community Safety Strategy Group set up to steer the Partnership and allocate resources. A Community Safety Partnership Plan, based on a joint strategic assessment, is in place with clear focus on anti-social behaviour, crime reduction, domestic abuse and alcohol. Improved performance management arrangements have been implemented. This is positive work, although progress since the inspection has been slow and is not yet completed. The impact of the Partnership's delivery groups in tackling anti-social behaviour and the perception of fear of crime is still unclear.

85 Fear of crime remains disproportionately high. The Council responds well to environmental problems which affect fear of crime, such as graffiti, and taking steps to tackle the needs of vulnerable groups such as people with learning disabilities and gypsies and travellers, who may be subject to hate crime. Despite low crime, local people indicate that crime is the most important issue for them and too many are worried about becoming a victim of crime. The Council and partners are now working on improved communication with the public, but the impact of this is not yet apparent.

86 The Council and its partners are taking positive action to reduce the number of young people offending. The Youth Offending Service, established in October 2006, makes a good contribution to preventative work through the multi-agency neighbourhood teams. Numbers of young people entering the criminal justice system for the first time have fallen significantly since April 2008.

87 The Council and partners have an appropriate focus on drugs. The Drug and Alcohol Action Team (DAAT) is effective. The number of people entering and remaining in treatment is above average at 82 per cent. Services for young people with substance misuse problems have been developed and commissioning and harm reduction arrangements are good.

88 The Council's performance in reducing road casualties is good. Road safety and accident prevention work is effective. Wokingham has the third highest car ownership in the country and accident statistics and the condition of roads and footways are among the best in the country. There were 63 incidents of people being killed or seriously injured on the roads in 2007/08, the average for all councils was 116. In addition, 497 people were slightly injured on the roads in 2007/08 the average for all councils was 936.

89 Response to emergency situations is effective. The Council has an effective business continuity plan and an emergency plan based on risk. It participates fully with partners and neighbours through the Berkshire Emergency Planning Structure, an Emergency Planning Group and the Berkshire Regional Continuity Forum. A well used web-site that provides up-to-date information on any emergency as it arises is in place. The Council met the challenge of recent floods well.

90 The Council is working to build stronger communities through its development of neighbourhood working, but this is not complete and the outcomes are not clear in all areas. The Council has worked well with the local police in developing Neighbourhood Action Groups (NAGS) where the police, the community and the Council come together to identify local problems and work together to resolve the issues. NAGS have been successful in tackling issues such as low level anti-social behaviour in Rainbow Park and Gorse Ride. Success in other areas of the borough has been patchy. Some NAGS are poorly supported, lack clear commitment and leadership and are not yet fully engaged. Outcomes from the Council's investment in community cohesion are unclear. A range of initiatives are in place, for example, the Council is improving its communications with different ethnic minority groups through the BME forum and is now setting up a group to engage with Gypsies and Travellers. However, there is more to do to understand the needs of some minority communities and as yet the Council and its partners are unclear about all the inequality issues which need to be tackled.

What has been achieved?

Healthier communities

91 The Council and its partners are not systematically evaluating the impact of their work aimed at ensuring sustained good health and tackling concerns to improve the health and well-being of all local people. There has been little progress to narrow the gap in life expectancy in the borough. The Council has been slow to focus on health and well-being at the strategic level, though this is changing. There is a growing understanding of local public health. A recent joint Strategic Needs Assessment has provided an improved analysis of current and predicted health and well-being outcomes. The Council and the PCT will use this assessment with other partners to inform local service development.

92 Joint approaches to promote health improvements across the area are strengthening. Partnership working with the local health community is improving following significant change within the PCT and the increasing focus on health and well-being within the Council. Partners' ambitions for a healthy community are reflected in the LAA. Targets focus on tackling obesity, alcohol misuse and reducing health inequalities, specifically linked to increasing breast feeding and smoking cessation. Shared outcome targets are yet to be developed and agreed. The Community Well-being Strategy Group of the WBSP is leading on developing the strategic approach on behalf of all partners. In this way the Council and its partners are raising their focus on reducing inequalities across the area to ensure that all communities have opportunities to share in a good quality of life.

93 Healthier lifestyles are encouraged through some targeted programmes. Leisure activities aimed at children and people with physical disabilities are enabling greater participation in sports and improved self confidence. Subsidised access to leisure facilities for families on low income has increased take up levels. The Health Walks programme is well supported and popular. Sixty volunteers provide an extensive range of walks for approximately 890 people with different abilities and long-term conditions. However, there is more to do to work with partners to target better activities, such as weight management programmes, to areas where they could have the greatest impact on improving life expectancy and reducing inequalities.

94 Some targeted work promotes good health and well-being to potentially vulnerable communities. Although levels of teenage conceptions are low, the Council is working well in all schools through the extended schools programme to reduce levels and focus widely on related sexual health issues. Targeted pilot activities for people with physical and sensory disabilities have been well received and a regular programme is now being developed. However, there is more to do to improve outcomes for people who are homeless. There has been a reduction in the use of bed and breakfast accommodation but its use is still above the national average and the use of hostel accommodation remains high.

95 The Council and its partners focus well on the needs of people with learning disabilities. The Wokingham Learning Disability Partnership Board is highly effective in delivering new services for people with learning disabilities and in giving them a voice. The Council and its partners have built a new resource centre, designed by people with learning disabilities and their carers. The Support Horizons community interest company works as an ethical employment agency providing employment for people with learning disabilities who deliver disability awareness training to local employers. In addition it supports social projects and a gardening social enterprise scheme which employs people with learning disabilities. Some people with learning disabilities benefit from access to personalised budgets. Help and support is provided to enable the person to develop how they wish to spend the funding available to them.

Older people

96 The Council is developing a good strategic approach to respond to what is most important to older people. Improved outcomes are enabling some frail and vulnerable older people to live safely and independently. Efforts to secure more opportunities for participation in community life are good. The Older People's Partnership Board is influencing change across the borough and stimulating opportunities for partnership working on key issues that affect many older people. Given the population profile, the Council and its partners have given priority to tackling the needs of frail elderly people. It acknowledges that there is more to do to ensure a co-ordinated approach to providing for its increasing numbers of people over 50 years of age.

97 The Council with its partners is delivering well against its stated priority of support for vulnerable people. A councillor champion works well across the Council and with the Executive to ensure a cross-cutting approach to relevant service issues. The emerging strategic approach, as articulated in the Older People's Strategy, goes beyond care services. Older people have led the development of the strategy and it is clearly based on what older people in the area have identified as most important. The focus of service planning is on networking, transport, access to services, housing and healthy living. Services are beginning to work together more corporately to develop a shared approach to meeting identified needs. For example, an effective campaign has increased older people's take up of benefits. The Council and its partners are well placed to support the independence and well-being of this community.

98 Engagement with older people is targeted and meaningful. A range of mechanisms has been developed to enable local older people engage effectively with the Council and its partners. Five Older People's Forums are well supported. Participants determine what they wish the forum to focus on and this includes social networking and discussions on issues affecting their community. The Council and its partners supported the Celebrating Age conference which effectively captured local views and provided taster sessions for a range of activities. Information booklets on services are widely available and well publicised. As a result the Council and its partners can be confident that there are good opportunities to capture older people's views and share information.

What has been achieved?

99 Some targeted and co-ordinated services are being delivered to promote well-being in later life. The Council and its partners support the Link visiting scheme, a befriending scheme aimed at combating loneliness and a health mentoring scheme is being introduced. Physical activity sessions, such as Mature Movers, Forever Fit and Tai Chi sessions, aimed at improving and maintaining mobility and well-being are well attended and provided at venues across the borough. Feedback from participants is positive. A handyperson scheme provided by Age Concern provides services for older people on a low income. The Council is providing land and funding for extra care housing to replace an existing sheltered accommodation which is no longer needed. The new unit will provide 45 flats for extra care housing and a specialist wing for people with dementia.

100 The Council and its partners focus well on ensuring the independence and safety of older people who are more vulnerable. Everyone receives an initial assessment and rehabilitation service irrespective of their ability to fund their own care or eligibility for statutory services. However, there is more to do to reduce the number of delayed discharges from hospital. Robust arrangements are in place to reduce the risk of falls. The Falls Advisory service in partnership with Age Concern offers practical advice to older people on keeping mobile and avoiding falls. There has been a reduction in the number of admissions to hospital as a result of falls. There are a growing range of practical assistance and prevention services to enable people to live at home safely.

Children and young people

101 Outcomes for most children and young people in Wokingham are good. However, outcomes for some of the most vulnerable children and young people vary from good to inadequate. Although many services are good, the contribution of the council and its partners to improving support and provision for children at risk or requiring safeguarding is inadequate. Children and young people enjoy generally good health. Levels of educational attainment are among the highest in the country, however some children and young people from vulnerable groups do not achieve as well as their peers. Opportunities for children and young people to make a positive contribution and to achieve economic well-being are good. The combined work of local services in improving outcomes for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is good, but is only adequate for children and young people who are looked after.

102 The management of services for children and young people in Wokingham is adequate. The revised Children and Young People's Plan reflects the council's renewed emphasis on 'success for all' rather than 'success for most'. Consultation and engagement with children, young people and stakeholders are effective. Locality and multi-agency working has been implemented successfully and is improving access and early intervention for vulnerable children. Partnership relationships are well established across public sector agencies. Constant change and stretched management capacity has led to fire-fighting and reactivity which has hindered effective prioritisation by service managers. Capacity overall is adequate. Decisive action is now being taken to tackle significant weaknesses in safeguarding and aspects of the social care service, but there is still much to do. Performance management is adequate, although performance monitoring is not yet effective in all areas. The capacity to improve further is adequate.

103 The combined work of all local services in securing the health of children and young people is good. Effective health promotion encourages and supports healthy eating and active lifestyles. Teenage pregnancy rates are low. Good impact from preventative early intervention is evident in many aspects of the lives of children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The quality of specialist services and support for children and families with mental health difficulties are good. However, the impact of the partners' strategy on improving provision of CAMHS is inadequate. Slow progress had been made in revising the strategic plan, completing a detailed analysis of need and consulting children, young people and families. Health provision for looked after children is adequate.

104 Children and young people appear safe, however the contribution of all local services to improving outcomes for children and young people at risk or requiring safeguarding is inadequate. Fundamental aspects of safeguarding are inadequate, including key elements of children's social care. The quality of child protection work is inadequate with evidence of drift and a lack of decisiveness in too many cases. Assessment and recording are poor. Auditing, evaluation and analysis of safeguarding in children's social care and across partner agencies are inadequate. There are significant weaknesses in the work and management of the Local Children Safeguarding Board and in safe recruitment processes. There is some evidence of very recent improvements in practice; however, this are not embedded and the impact not been evaluated. Early intervention and preventative services are good. Provision in extended schools and children's centres has been strengthened further by improving partnership work across the borough.

105 The impact of all local services in helping children and young people to enjoy their education and to achieve well is good. The quality of childcare and early years' provision is good. Levels of educational attainment are among the highest in the country. Some vulnerable groups continue to underachieve, but progress in being made in closing the attainment gap. Standards at all key stages have been consistently above national average for some years. Attainment at GCSE is good and improving; unvalidated GCSE results for 2008 show that this track record has been maintained. Children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities achieve better at school than their peers in other areas. Looked after children make satisfactory progress at school. Effective action has been taken to reduce exclusions overall, although children from some minority ethnic groups are disproportionately excluded. Children who are unable to attend school receive high quality alternative education.

106 The impact of all local services in helping children and young people to make a positive contribution to society is good. Overall levels of crime are low and offending by looked after children and young people has fallen and is now low. Targeted interventions are helping to tackle anti-social behaviour. The proportion of young people aged 13–19 in contact with the youth service is in line with the national target and the quality of provision is adequate. A high proportion of looked after children and young people participate in their reviews and there is good support and encouragement to help them take part in leisure activities. The views of children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are taken into account in planning provision.

What has been achieved?

107 The impact of all local services in helping children and young people to achieve economic well-being is good. A high proportion of young people continue in further education and achieve Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications compared to the national average. The number of young people who are not in employment, education or training is low. Looked after young people are well prepared for independence by the care leaving service and have good access to advice and support. Thorough planning for transition to adulthood ensures that young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are also well supported. An expanding range of good provision develops their skills and employability, however the choice is more limited in post-16 education and training at entry level and for those with the most complex needs.

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 Wokingham Borough Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 15 to 26 September 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.

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