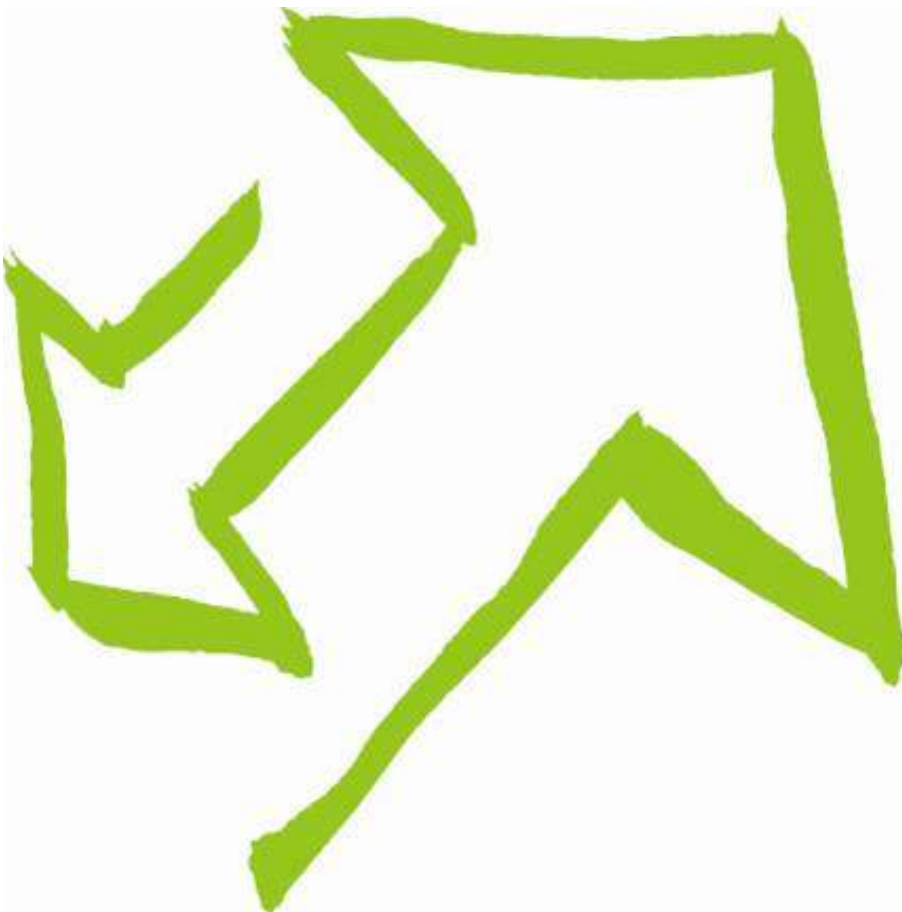


Corporate Assessment

Reading Borough Council

December 2008



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Status of our reports

The Statement of Responsibilities of Auditors and Audited Bodies issued by the Audit Commission explains the respective responsibilities of auditors and of the audited body. Reports prepared by appointed auditors are addressed to non-executive directors/members or officers. They are prepared for the sole use of the audited body. Auditors accept no responsibility to:

- any director/member or officer in their individual capacity; or
 - any third party.
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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

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 Overall the Council is performing well. With its partners across the borough, county and sub-region, it has developed clear and challenging Council ambitions stated until 2020 that are cross-cutting and reflect the needs and diversity of its communities. These cover nine key, cross-cutting themes that provide a clear vision of how Reading will change over the medium and longer term and are underpinned by challenging targets. The Council is forward looking, with a strong understanding with partners of the key challenges facing Reading, Berkshire and the surrounding sub-region. These challenges include responding to the demands for economic growth, waste management and transport. This Council exerts influence beyond what one would expect from its geographical size.
- 6 The Council is providing strong and effective leadership through partnership working. It has played a leading role with partners in shaping ambitions through the Reading 2020 Partnership (the local strategic partnership) and delivery through the Local Area Agreement (LAA). It led on the refreshment of the Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS) and the second LAA. The Council uses its extensive knowledge and intelligence about the borough and its communities to good effect, adopting a long-term approach to issues. The Council is influencing the policies required to promote economic development and transport for the sub-region.
- 7 The Council's medium term financial strategy, one-year service improvement priorities and business plans translate its ambitions into clear priorities with ambitious targets. Partners are involved in setting targets within the corporate plan, helping ensure that they are challenging and realistic. Political leadership is effective and well regarded and this has not been altered by the move to no overall control at the May 2008 elections; the full council in June 2008 confirmed that the long-term vision of the Council remained constant. Senior councillors play an active and influential role in championing the needs of the borough in terms of economic development, community safety, and services for older people and children and young people.
- 8 The Council provides strong community leadership, improving diversity and user focus. This is especially the case with its black and minority ethnic (BME) communities and other hard to reach groups, tackling difficult issues in an inclusive but purposeful way. It is improving community cohesion including confronting extremist behaviour in a positive way. Residents recognise that theirs is a tolerant community. The Council has reached level 3 of the equality standard and is working towards level 4. An effective in-house interpretation and translation service which is used by Council, the PCT and partners has helped all organisations deliver information about a wide range of service to those for whom English is a second language. Service take up from a wide range of the community has increased as a result. The Council has an effective ethnic minorities forum which actively contributes to developing the vision for the area and to shaping service delivery. This has resulted in improvements to service delivery and has been helpful in raising issues over the high exclusion rates in Caribbean boys and BME attainment rates, both of which have improved as a result.

- 9 The Council has the capacity to deliver its priorities effectively. The Council is highly successful in attracting external funding, including European funding, as well as negotiating financial contributions to strategic improvements from companies building in the borough. It is also strengthening its approach to organisational development through its Transforming Services programmes that have strong project and programme management. Corporate governance is sound and political decision making is transparent. The workforce is generally well trained and motivated though workforce planning is not fully developed. Work is underway to improve the scrutiny process following the move to the opposition parties assuming all the chairing of the scrutiny groups in May 2008.
- 10 The Council performs well in achieving and improving value for money and its resources are used cost effectively. It has delivered savings and efficiency gains in excess of targets, achieving its three-year Gershon targets, whilst keeping council tax low.
- 11 Operating within tight financial constraints, the Council has maintained its generally high performance in its own services. Performance indicators show above-average improvement over one and three years. The Council has maintained a strong and effective focus on its priorities over the long-term, especially on economic development and waste management. On sustainable communities, the Council has raised resources and national support to deliver Council objectives and outcomes, such as the Reading Station renewal, the Green Park business district and the redevelopment of the Madejski Stadium corridor. Actions taken by the Council and partners are also helping to reduce deaths and injuries through road accidents. Not all services are highly performing, for instance, in the time taken to assess older people with care needs. Reading is a relatively high crime area, even though crime has decreased by some 14 per cent since 2003/04, and the level of fear of crime is just above the regional average. The Council has also not been effective in dealing with the high level of teenage conceptions in the borough or in ensuring that vulnerable children's needs are properly safeguarded.
- 12 Performance management is only adequate but is developing further, especially through the LAA. The council has a well established performance management framework that has been strengthened over recent months. Partnerships are developing their reporting and monitoring arrangements and are using the available information to inform their decision-making. However, a rigorous and consistent performance management culture is not yet in place.

Areas for improvement

- 13** The wide range of Council and partners' priorities needs adequate human resources but the Council's workforce planning is not fully developed and neither is there an explicit link to the capacity of partners. In a time of increasingly tight financial resources, this is an essential area for development.
- 14** A rigorous and consistent performance management culture is not fully embedded and performance reports do not always give sufficient focus to where performance is still not good enough. There is a need in some service areas to equip managers to manage at a higher level of performance by ensuring that high priority is given to developing management skills to manage weak performance robustly.

Summary of assessment scores

Headline questions	Theme	Score*
What is the Council, together with its partners trying to achieve?	Ambition	3
	Prioritisation	3
What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?	Capacity	3
	Performance Management	2
What has been achieved?	Achievement	3
Overall Corporate Assessment Score **		3
* 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

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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

- 16** Reading is in the South East Region, 41 miles due west of London. A densely populated urban area covering 40 square kilometres, the town's strategic location on the M4 corridor and excellent rail links make it a major transport interchange, with easy access to London and to Heathrow airport. The borough has developed rapidly over the last ten years, with a huge structural shift away from its manufacturing base to its current role as the service and financial centre of the Thames Valley. The borough's population is estimated at 149,700, and it is a relatively young area with a high proportion of 20-35 year olds, and more males than females in these age groups. In the last ten years, the number of over 75s has risen by six per cent although this is below the average for Berkshire and England. The Greater Reading urban area extends the catchment population considerably and increasingly the borough operates as a sub-regional centre attracting large numbers of workers, shoppers and visitors. The average figure for daily footfall in the town centre is 300,000 and up to 20,000 people use the town centre facilities on a typical weekend evening. By contrast, over 40 per cent of the borough's pupils attend schools outside the area.
- 17** Reading has the third most diverse population in the South East, with 134 languages spoken in its schools. The 2001 census recorded 13 per cent of the population as coming from black and ethnic minority (BME) communities, with the largest non-white community being Pakistani and comprising almost 3 per cent of the population. In recent years there has been a considerable influx from the EU accession states, in particular Poland. The January 2008 school census shows that 39 per cent of pupils now come from a non-British heritage background (in comparison to 29.5 per cent in January 2005).
- 18** Within a small geographical area, Reading combines some very affluent communities with more deprived neighbourhoods. On the Government's Index of Multiple Deprivation 2007, it is ranked 151 out of 354 authorities and there are 11 Super Output Areas (SOAs) in the 20 per cent most deprived in England. In January 2008, 16.2 per cent of children enrolled in Council schools were eligible for free school meals, with ten schools having a free school meals eligibility rate of more than 30 per cent. The borough has the largest proportion of lone parents with dependent children among the six Berkshire authorities (Whitley ward has the highest proportion at 11 per cent).

Context

- 19** The Centre for Cities report states that, based on employment, population growth and skills, Reading is England's top performing urban area and its economy is expected to grow by 3.4 per cent per year until 2020, putting it top of the UK growth list. However, this prosperity makes considerable demands on Reading's environment, transport and housing, with relatively high house prices. Also, the unemployment rate of 1.7 per cent is above the South East average and ensuring that all Reading residents share the town's prosperity remains a challenge for the Council. While Reading ranks 12th in the South East for the proportion of people educated to degree level and higher, there are significant numbers of residents with low or no qualifications and the number of 14-19 year olds who are not in employment, education or training (NEET), while reducing, remains above the national average.
- 20** Life expectancy for both men and women is higher than the national average and there is less health-related deprivation in the borough than in England as a whole. Health inequalities exist in the borough, including people from the most affluent areas living on average six years' longer than those in the poorest part.

The Council

- 21** The Council comprises 46 councillors, of whom 19 are Labour, 18 Conservative, 8 Liberal Democrat and 1 Independent. The Council is governed by a Leader and an executive of nine. As well as statutory committees, the Council has five theme-based Overview and Scrutiny panels. Following the local elections in May 2008, it now has a minority Labour administration, whilst the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats share chairmanship of scrutiny.
- 22** The Chief Executive and four directors and the Head of Policy, Performance and Community make up the Corporate Management Team. The four directorates are Corporate Resources, Education and Children's Services, Environment, Culture and Sport and Housing and Community Care. The Council employs approximately 4,800 people across a range of services. It receives a low level of government funding, yet in 2008/09, the Council tax increase was 1.9 per cent. The Council Tax for 2008/09 at Band D is £1,379.32. The net expenditure for the current year is £116.4 million and the capital programme is £133.8 million.
- 23** The Council has been rated as a 3 star Council against the CPA scorecard in the last three years and in 2007 the Direction of Travel judged the council to be 'improving well'. The previous corporate assessment in 2002 scored the council as 3.
- 24** The Council is an active member of a range of partnership forums, nationally, regionally and locally. The Council currently holds the interim chairmanship of the Reading 2020 partnership (the LSP) and has led the partnership to the latest version of the Local Area Agreement. Other partnerships include the joint waste facility with two Berkshire unitary authorities recently opened in Reading. Current work on a Transport Innovation Fund (TIF) bid with a number of local authorities is being led by the Council, including plans for a new Thames bridge, park and ride facilities planned across the region as well as road improvements.

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

Ambition

- 25** The Council performs well in this area. With its partners across the county and the sub region, it has developed clear and challenging ambitions that reflect the needs and diversity of Reading's communities. The Council knows that ambitions for regeneration have yet to result in all their residents benefiting from the wealth that has been created by development in the borough. The Council is though ambitious for the area and demonstrates good leadership. It works well with central and local government partners, businesses and the voluntary sector in developing this vision. The Council is recognised as a leader through its councillors and managers at a regional and national level. Ambitions are informed by comprehensive knowledge of what is important to citizens. It has a well informed and long-term approach to issues and challenges and is constructive in its approach to managing and working in complex partnerships. It is playing a pivotal role in place-shaping.
- 26** Consultation to inform ambitions for Reading has been thorough and inclusive. Robust consultation was undertaken to develop the Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS), which is stated until 2020. It involved statutory and non-statutory stakeholders and residents, including hard to reach and BME groups, to achieve consensus on many issues which the council and its communities face. The Ethnic Minorities Board actively contributes to developing the vision for the area and to shaping service delivery. This involvement has led to improvements to service delivery - for example, by raising issues on the high exclusion rates of Afro-Caribbean boys and the attainment rates of pupils from BME groups, both rates have improved as a result. Consultation leading up to the development of the Children and Young People's plan engaged over 3,000 people. Feedback is also given once the consultation has been analysed and decisions taken. This means that residents are included thoroughly in setting ambitions and clear what happens as a result of consultation.

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

- 27** Ambitions for the community address well the underlying needs of the area and are underpinned by data that confirms these needs. The Council uses a wide range of data, including MOSAIC (a database that tracks lifestyle choices and circumstances and maps these down to postcode level). This data is shared with partners such as the Fire and Rescue Service and PCT to develop a clear understanding of the underlying needs of the area and its role in meeting them. This has led the SCS to agree the overarching vision for Reading:

'To maintain and improve the quality of life in Reading, embracing the challenges of a dynamic urban community of the 21st century. Everyone will have the opportunity to benefit from all that Reading can offer. Everyone has a part to play in shaping our future'.

Nine residents' priorities in the SCS have been directly translated to form the Council's corporate plan to maintain this strong focus on what residents say are areas for attention. These priority areas are: A Fairer Reading for All; Children and Young People; Cleaner and Greener Environments; Culture, Leisure and Sport; Decent and Affordable Housing; Healthy People and Lifestyles; Thriving Economy and Skills; Safer and Stronger Communities; and Transport and Accessible Spaces. The Council has further used this information to develop its Thriving Neighbourhoods Programme and this is ensuring that areas of most need are prioritised for specific service delivery.

- 28** Ambitions are particularly clear and challenging in economic regeneration. Working with the many large businesses in Reading has helped to develop plans and a shared understanding of challenges. This is ensuring that the economic success of Reading is supported by an infrastructure to meet the needs of business; for instance, training opportunities are matched by service providers to ensure a healthy skills base in Reading for large employers. Particular focus is being given to the A33 corridor, including the Green Park business district, and the creation of housing on former brown field and contaminated sites. The Council is also leading on the redevelopment of the Reading Station site, recognised as a bottleneck for trains due to the limited number and length of platforms; the Council aims to help ease congestion and increase the speed of trains, and use the site for additional retail and housing development. The Council knows however that not all residents currently enjoy the benefits of the wealth of the borough and that therefore there is scope for a more strategic approach. In showing leadership on economic regeneration projects, the Council is enabling the economic agenda to be tackled well.

- 29** The council uses the SCS priorities effectively to define clear and challenging ambitions for itself. With Thames Valley Police the council also supports Neighbourhood Action Groups to ensure it understands the community safety issues that are important to local people. The Council through its corporate plan, sets SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and times) aims to achieve its ambitions in these areas. For example, it is implementing a major programme of regeneration at Dee Park to deal with the physical structures, life chances and opportunities of this deprived area. These include reducing smoking; increasing participation in exercise; and launching the West of Berkshire Home Improvement Agency to help vulnerable homeowners or private sector tenants who are older, disabled or on low income to repair, improve, maintain or adapt their home. As a consequence, residents, partners, councillors and staff are clear what needs to happen to deliver the agreed ambitions.
- 30** The Council is providing strong and effective leadership. Senior councillors and senior managers play an active and influential role in championing the needs of the borough especially in terms of economic development and community cohesion. The Council has played a pivotal role in the formation of sub-regional partnerships. These include the Berkshire Economic Strategy Board, which has oversight and direction of the sub-regional elements of the Regional Economic Strategy, and the Berkshire Strategic Transport Forum, that has developed shared transport priorities. The Council also works well with the other unitary authorities in Berkshire. Through the re3 Waste Partnership the council and partners have set clear and challenging ambitions for the community in terms of waste and the Joint Waste Partnership Strategy clearly sets these out. Political and managerial leadership is effective and well regarded and this has not been altered by the move to no overall control at the May 2008 elections. In June 2008 the full council reaffirmed the ambitions as the correct ones and this has given confidence to residents that the ambitions are correct and that long-term efforts to improve the are will continue. As a result, the Council's leadership is recognised as strong, locally and regionally.

Prioritisation

- 31** The Council performs well in this area. Priorities reflect the views and needs of the borough's communities well and are appropriately focused on local and national issues. Consultation is extensive, inclusive and effective, and is used to monitor progress with regular surveys of citizens and users. Clear and robust plans are in place to deliver the priorities, with partners. Resources are allocated accordingly. The Council has been rigorous and successful in its approach to delivering most of its priorities over time.

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

32 Council priorities have been well formed by and address the needs of vulnerable groups. The Council listens to the needs of its communities including its wide range of BME communities and hard to reach groups. These needs are central in developing the ambition for the Council and its partners. Through activities such as the BME Housing Survey and reviewing the educational attainment of BME Communities, trends are assessed and needs are addressed. Services are commissioned to meet the needs of specific groups. For example, BASIAN (Black and Asian Services in Alcohol and Narcotics) has been commissioned to engage Asian users, following analysis showing that BME users were not being retained in traditional services, and take action on reducing alcohol misuse. As a result, the needs of residents including the most vulnerable, are being addressed appropriately by the Council in setting priorities.

33 The Council's priorities support SCS ambitions and are clear and robust and reflected well in its corporate plan. SMART targets for its own services are set out against the strategic objectives that sit underneath each of the nine SCS ambitions. In addition, over the coming year, the Council is placing particular emphasis on six short term Service Improvement Priorities (SIPs). These SIPs are set out below with the related SCS themes in brackets:

- school improvement (children and young people);
- waste management (cleaner and greener environments);
- urban regeneration/sustainable growth and communities (safer and stronger communities; thriving economy and skills);
- improve the quality of Council homes (decent and affordable housing);
- modernise community care (healthy people and lifestyles); and
- improve sport and leisure facilities (culture, leisure and sport; healthy people and lifestyles).

These SIPs are agreed by all political groups. The clarity and connections between the SCS, strategic objectives and SIPs provides a strong foundation on which to plan service delivery.

34 The priority targets are well integrated into corporate and service plans. The SCS and the Council's high-level strategies such as the Local Transport Plan set a clear framework for prioritisation. These strategies and plans are well aligned with each other and with national priorities and this is reflected in, for example, the recently negotiated Local Area Agreement. There are also strong links between SCS, the Medium Term Financial Strategy and business plans, which are then reflected in team and individual plans, so the Council has effectively addressed and interrelated long, medium and short term priorities. There is a wide understanding and commitment to delivering the priorities across the Council. This provides a strong basis for delivering improvements in a co-ordinated way to enable their achievement.

- 35** The Council and partners take robust action to move resources from lower to higher priorities. Work with partners and residents has informed the Council's decision-making in allocating resources and stakeholders are clear about the prioritisation decisions the Council makes. Examples include delivering the transport priorities, through joint research to target bus routes and road schemes. SIPs are helping councillors to focus on what is and is not a priority and this has helped them to be clear when moving resources between services. Resources moved from lower priority services include closing two residential homes to support its priority of modernising community care. Resources released have been moved to services like the housing nuisance team, graffiti cleaning and drug and alcohol rehabilitation. The Council and partners therefore enable service improvements to occur where these are identified as priorities.
- 36** The Council takes robust action to deliver its priorities, although it sometimes misreads stakeholders' opinions when setting priorities. Successful actions include: externalising a car park to gain funding; running leisure centres through an external partnership; and encouraging the creation of the John Madejski Academy after acknowledging that the current focus and funding was insufficient to improve standards. It has used the opportunity of improving rail services to secure improvements to long-standing local highway pinch-points, especially the Cow Lane bridges. Also, the Council has refused some strategically significant capital projects when the revenue implications did not provide value for money, such as a new 50 metre swimming pool, even though it fitted well with the ambitions of Sport Reading. It showed resolve when moving to fortnightly refuse collection, which was unpopular with some residents, as the Council was sure it was the correct thing to do. However, the Council underestimated the strength of opposition to the re-routing a town centre road, subsequently initiating the Integrated Transport Commission and committing to adopt its recommendations even if this means shelving the road change. The Council's strong focus on priorities is impacting well on services needing improvement, even if the Council does not always judge stakeholder opinion correctly.
- 37** Targets included in some strategies and plans are not sufficiently outcome-focused. In strategies such as the sustainable community strategy and the children and young people's plan, too many targets are about outputs rather than outcomes for users. However, other strategies such as the local development framework are more robust. In this case, specific, measurable, achievable, resourced and timed (SMART) targets are in place to measure progress against each policy in the core strategy. SMART targets enable the Council and its partners to know how well they are performing in improving outcomes for service users.

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

Capacity

- 38** The Council is performing well in this area. Strong leadership is provided for staff and the community. Financial management is good and helps maintain the focus on achieving value for money. This is supported by an innovative approach to procurement and good partnership working, which builds on the success in attracting external funding to deliver major projects and initiatives. These are being delivered well through an improved approach to project management linked to an effective corporate risk management regime. However, there is a gap in the way that the Council ensures that its workforce has the right skills to meet future demands. Overall, capacity is aligned well to deliver the Council's ambitions and priorities.
- 39** The Council's leadership is strong, internally and externally. The transition to a Council with no overall control has been smooth and the appointment of the new chief executive was made with cross party support. Staff were kept informed of what was happening and briefed on the possible implications. Working relations between officers and councillors are good and constructive. This is supported by their respective roles and responsibilities being clear. The Council's partners and business community regard Council leadership as strong and welcome the way that the Council works with them to deliver the local priorities. The senior leadership of the Council takes a leading role in key partnership groups such as Safer Reading. By providing strong leadership the direction that the Council takes is clear to both staff and the community.
- 40** The scrutiny process is providing more challenge following the elections in May 2008. Good examples of how the scrutiny panels have contributed to policy development in the recent past include their work on flooding and drugs misuse, which resulted in a change to how the Council responds to these issues. Now the panels are chaired by opposition councillors, who are looking to develop the role of scrutiny further to make more of an impact. This will start with a greater involvement in deciding what areas the panels will scrutinise. Councillor development is being improved as well. A good induction process is in place and now the focus is turning towards ensuring that the training offered matches more closely the specific development needs being identified. In this way the Council will build on its ability to ensure that there is good internal challenge and enhanced support for policy development.

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

- 41** A stringent financial management regime is in place. This ensures that savings are identified and maintains the clear focus on value for money. Over the past three years the Council has exceeded its £10 million target for Gershon savings by £2.1 million. The savings required for 2009/10 are already being identified. To support the drive towards achieving value for money the Council is enhancing the information it receives from benchmarking by joining a club that provides comparative information throughout the year. The value for money element of this is being piloted. The medium term financial strategy is robust and provides for the delivery of savings as well as the allocation of resources to priority areas. This is underpinned by the Council having sufficient reserves. This ensures that the resources are available to deliver the Council's priorities.
- 42** The Council is enhancing its project management capacity to ensure that it is able to deliver complex and large-scale projects. The business improvement team is working closely with consultants to introduce a portfolio project management approach to the way that the IT projects are co-ordinated. These IT initiatives, such as the introduction of the Council's CRM system, are critical to the success of the Council's Transforming Services programme, which seeks to improve the Council's effectiveness. Already the impact of this is seen through the significant savings achieved from the introduction of flexible home working and the resultant savings made on accommodation costs at Fountain House. Improved project management is supported by a sound approach to risk management. This is important if the Council is to ensure that key projects are implemented at the right time and efficiently.
- 43** The Council is particularly effective at attracting external funding to help deliver both its capital schemes as well as revenue based initiatives. Ten per cent of the Council's capital programme over the past two years has been funded by S106 money obtained through its structured approach to seeking contributions to infrastructure improvement. Major investment is also being attracted to the area to support significant improvements such as the £67 million for the new M4 junction 11 scheme. A team is charged with identifying and supporting the bidding for funds, including those available from Europe. Support is available to the local voluntary and community sector to identify sources of funding. In 2007/08 over £5 million was obtained to support a range of schemes. This provides the Council with a strong foundation upon which to deliver new initiatives and projects.
- 44** Strong partnership working is enhancing the Council's capacity to deliver services and major projects. The establishment of the Berkshire Economic Strategy Board as an arms length body responsible for economic development across the area is helping to focus attention on the key issues facing the region and marshal resources accordingly. Other examples include the Reading Sports partnership that has improved the provision of facilities in Reading. The major project to improve Reading station as a major transport hub demonstrates how well the Council works in partnership with others and lobbies to bring significant investment into the town. The Council funds, supports and works well with a large range of voluntary sector groups, also helping them to seek external funding. Strong partnership working is important when seeking to make best use of the resources available to an area.

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

- 45** There is a strong and effective approach to procurement. The internal approach is well structured and ensures that procurement is carried out effectively. In addition, a joint procurement unit has been set up with the other Berkshire councils using capacity building money. While progress to identify more opportunities for services to be shared is slow, there are good examples where partnership working is having a positive impact. The re3 waste consortium gives the Council additional capacity to improve its waste collection, disposal and recycling services. This is a PFI partnership with two neighbouring councils that has integrated their approach to provide a more efficient service and improved value for money. The Council's openness to innovative ways of working and delivering its services enhances available capacity.
- 46** The Council has a strong approach to managing diversity and equalities. It has reached level 3 of the equality standard and is working towards level 4. The effective ethnic minorities forum actively contributes to developing the vision for the area and to shaping service delivery. This has resulted in improvements to service delivery and has been helpful in raising issues over the high exclusion rates in Caribbean boys and BME attainment rates, both of which have improved as a result. Access to its services is enhanced through the effective in-house interpretation and translation service which is used by Council, the PCT and partners and has helped all organisations deliver information about a wide range of service to those for whom English is a second language. However, there is gap in the way that the Council's workforce reflects the community profile. While women are well represented at senior levels, this is not the case for the BME community. Those earning above £40,000 represent around five per cent of the total number of staff at that level, well below the percentage of the local population coming from those communities. It is important that the Council and its partners work effectively with all parts of the community to ensure that there is equal access to its services for all.
- 47** The approach to workforce planning is not fully developed and neither is there an explicit link to the capacity of partners. Each directorate has adopted their own approach, but this is not overseen corporately. Currently, the social services directorate is experiencing problems arising from the difficulty in recruiting staff. However, there is a strong corporate learning and development programme in place and the use of the appraisal system is improving to ensure that all staff have their training and development needs addressed. The number of staff having appraisals increased to 83 per cent in 2007/08 from 60 per cent the previous year. The target for 2008/09 is 90 per cent. Staff are well motivated and feel empowered to be innovative. It is important that the skills available in the workforce are sufficient to meet the demands placed on the Council and are used to best effect.

Performance management

- 48** Performance management is adequate. The council has a well established performance management framework that has been strengthened over recent months. Partnerships are developing their reporting and monitoring arrangements and are using the available information to inform their decision-making. However, a rigorous and consistent performance management culture is not yet in place.

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

- 49** The Council has a clear and well documented performance management framework. Corporate guidance has recently been updated to include a data quality policy and to take account of revised corporate priorities. A core performance management group meets to oversee the implementation of the strategy. The framework guidance sets out how corporate priorities link via other plans through to the appraisal of the work of individual members of staff. A template for service plans has been introduced to ensure a common format and to make sure the links between corporate and service plans are explained clearly and consistently. The guidance also sets out the processes for performance reporting. In this way, the Council has set out its expectations for councillors and staff, and the guidance is helping to support the development of a consistent and open approach to performance management.
- 50** Well established, adequate systems for reporting performance are in place. Reports showing results and trends against performance indicators (PIs) can be extracted from the Council's Quality Performance Review (QPR) system as needed by service teams and managers. Quarterly reports using a traffic light system are discussed by the directorate and corporate management teams and by cabinet. Benchmarks are included in QPR reports and the Council is increasingly making use of information available through its membership of benchmarking clubs and the all Berkshire improvement group. In addition, the Council uses in-year comparative analysis using a national consultancy's benchmarking data, enabling speedy comparison of performance with the majority of unitary councils. The Council has introduced the balanced scorecard approach to strengthen the links between corporate priorities and high level resources. At the more detailed level, work has started to link the performance and financial management systems so that financial and performance information can be read together.
- 51** From 2008/09, the Council has made progress in strengthening the role of scrutiny in monitoring performance. A rolling programme of presentations by directors to the relevant scrutiny panel is now in place and the Corporate, Community and External Affairs scrutiny panel has started to receive quarterly overview reports of the directors' top ten key indicators. In the past, scrutiny has provided limited challenge on performance, concentrating instead on particular initiatives or policy development, for example, in relation to school meals and on drug misuse and treatment. The new arrangements, with a strengthened cross-party approach, are helping councillors to take a more active role in performance management.

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

- 52** The Council is taking effective action to establish strong links between performance and risk management. The corporate risk management strategy has been re-written to take account of good practice in other councils. The strategy sets out the clear requirement that risk management is incorporated into every level of its performance management framework. A strategic risk management group is in place, chaired by the Director of Resources, and including representatives from each directorate. The group reviews the corporate risk register at each meeting and refers issues to the extended corporate management team. Reports have been made to the audit committee annually, but this is to become six-monthly. A partnership risk register is also maintained to ensure that partnership projects have the full engagement of stakeholders in identifying and managing any risks. The Council acknowledges that further work is required to ensure that risk management is fully embedded across the organisation and to do this the QPR system is to be used to send prompts automatically on risk related actions. Such improvements help ensure that awareness is raised and that action is taken to minimise risks.
- 53** The Council and its partners have sound systems in place for monitoring performance against LAA targets. An LAA protocol is in place for governance, performance monitoring and finance. The protocol sets out the procedures for collating and entering data into one central system until recently run by the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service. The information is then available to all partners via the internet. Quarterly reports on performance and spend against the targets are reported to a Policy and Performance Officers' Group and the 2020 Resources Sub-group. Exceptions are reported to the 2020 Board. Quarterly reports are also made to the Cabinet, scrutiny and relevant partnership forums. In this way, all partners are kept informed of progress against the LAA targets.
- 54** The quality and impact of performance management is inconsistent across other partnerships. Some have good arrangements - for example, a recent inspection reported that the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership is strong at using performance information to actively manage performance. However, performance reporting requirements in relation to the Council's grant funding to voluntary and community providers varies and some lack rigour. For the re3 waste management project, joint monitoring arrangements have been established by the three councils involved; however, capacity is limited for monitoring the contractor's performance. The Council acknowledges in its self assessment that arrangements vary between partnerships and it is therefore currently working with partners to audit governance arrangements and refocus on a robust approach to performance management. These developments will help ensure a robust and consistent approach.
- 55** Performance reports generated by QPR provide information on progress against targets but there is an inadequate focus on where performance is still not good enough. For example, improvement trends may be positive but actual performance is still below average or in the worst quartile. In the case of safeguarding children at risk, reports have not focused sufficiently on poor or worsening performance in relation to some critical national standards. Papers and presentations to corporate managers and councillors, and publications such as the Live magazine, emphasise success and improvement but lack clarity on areas of weakness that need to be addressed. As a result, the Council is not promoting awareness of where improvements are necessary.

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

- 56** In some service areas, the Council and its partners are acting on knowledge about performance to drive improvements very effectively. For example, a clear focus on improving educational attainment in Reading schools has resulted in a very strong track record of improvement in recent years although overall performance remains below average. Effective action by partners has also led to other improvements such as the reduction in the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET). The Council is able to demonstrate where its efforts have made an impact for minority groups. For example, satisfaction levels among tenants from black and minority ethnic (BME) groups have shown a significant increase. The Council responds positively to complaints and uses them to improve services, such as the effective action taken by partners to reduce racial incidents in schools. In this way, the Council is using customer feedback effectively to target action and achieve improvements.

What has been achieved?

- 57** The Council is performing well in this area. There is some high performance on the shared priorities. It is achieving significantly in economic development and transport and in building stronger and cohesive communities. This is especially the case with its black and minority ethnic (BME) communities and other hard to reach groups, tackling difficult issues in an inclusive but purposeful way. It is improving community cohesion including confronting extremist behaviour in a positive way. In caring for vulnerable older people, the rates of delayed discharges are now amongst the best in the region. Health activities are well targeted and achieving good impact, such as attracting increasing numbers of residents. The Joint Area Review has though found serious shortcomings in some aspects of keeping children and young people safe, and partners have been slow to address the high teenage conception rates. Reading is also a relatively high crime area, even though crime has decreased by some 14 per cent since 2003/04, and the level of fear of crime is just above the regional average. Overall, Reading residents are receiving a generally high level of service from the Council.
- 58** Ambitions, priorities and capacity shape and lead the achievement of outcomes, with performance management being in development. There is a clear understanding and agreement between councillors, staff and residents of what needs to be done to improve services for residents.
- 59** The Council has maintained its generally high performance in its own services, set against its priorities, though this is not universal. Performance indicators (PIs) show above-average improvement over one and three years and the Council has maintained a strong and effective focus on its priorities over the long-term, especially on economic development and waste management. On the other hand, the Council has 24 per cent of its PIs above the best quartile which is below average compared to other councils. Also, the Council traditionally struggles with achieving generally high performance at secondary school level, reflecting the configuration of schools that it inherited at local government reorganisation.
- 60** Council performance against its priorities is generally high, as follows:
- On 'A Fairer Reading for All', the borough is a generally high wage area with high calibre workers yet there are still areas where attainment in education is low, and where life expectancy varies.
 - On 'Children and Young People', performance is generally adequate. Health outcomes for looked after children and young people are good and the proportion of pupils in Reading schools achieving five or more GCSE passes at grades A*-C (including English and mathematics) is above the national average. Yet, teenage pregnancies continue to be well above the national average and safeguarding performance against several key child protection indicators is poor.

- On 'Cleaner and Greener Environments', performance includes top quartile performance in recycling & composting rate and above average performance on costs of waste collection, being enhanced by the joint waste recycling centre. On the other hand graffiti remains a problem.
- On 'Culture, Leisure and Sport', the take-up of exercise is improving and joint provision with partners is targeting those at most in need.
- On 'Decent and Affordable Housing' there is top quartile performance on the Council's decent homes standard.
- On 'Healthy People and Lifestyles' life expectancy in Reading is high though with some differences between income groups.
- On 'Thriving Economy and Skills' economic development is very strong though unemployment hotspots remain.
- On 'Safer and Stronger Communities' the number of casualties from accidents are among the lowest in the country.
- On 'Transport and Accessible Spaces' there is high use and satisfaction with bus services, and the Council-led TIF bid involves a range of measures to reduce car travel, and consequently improve congestion and air quality.

As a result, residents experience a generally high quality of service as measured by the Council's priorities.

Sustainable communities and transport

- 61** The Council is making a strong and long-term contribution to the economic vitality of the area and has excellent transport services. However, good work on council-owned housing is not mirrored by the state of some privately owned housing stock. High skills levels generally mask relatively high unemployment and economic inactivity amongst parts of its population. Performance on recycling and composting is good being amongst the best 25 per cent nationally but the cost of waste disposal being in the second worst 25 per cent.
- 62** The Council is making a major contribution to the economic well being of the borough and greater Reading. The tight alignment of key strategies such as the Sustainable Community Strategy, Local Transport Plan and LDF Core Strategy provides a robust policy framework which has leveraged resources and national support to deliver Council objectives. Significant infrastructure improvements include the Reading Station renewal, Green Park business district and the redevelopment of the Madejski Stadium corridor. The Council actively works with neighbours in greater Reading on both policies, advocacy for and in delivery of projects, for example, M4 Junction 11 and the TIF bid, where impacts are widespread.

What has been achieved?

- 63** The Council works innovatively to promote the economy and increase job opportunities. For example, it has used an arms length body, ReadingUK CIC, to lead on achieving a sustainable and successful local economy by engaging with businesses and promoting Reading as a location of choice. The Council has also promoted small and medium enterprise (SME) growth which last year encouraged 572 pre start ups. However, the impact of this economic development has not been equally effective for all parts of the community. At one end of the labour market, the area is characterised as a major growth point with high value international computer companies employing highly skilled staff. But at the other end of the scale, Reading's deficiency in skilled labour for the support sectors of the economy is mirrored by higher unemployment compared to other areas of the South East and economic inactivity amongst parts of its population. This skills gap is being addressed by the Council in a leadership role with other agencies although with only relatively limited evidenced success to date. Strong economic development does not therefore benefit all sectors of the community.
- 64** The Council has made significant progress in some aspects of housing management. The Council through its PFI and coordinated approach to Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) has effectively addressed the needs and conditions in the social housing sector. It is also on track to meet Decent Homes Standards targets by 2010. Homelessness has been reduced. However, an updated housing strategy, based on needs and other assessments, is currently only work-in-progress. Housing conditions in the private sector, especially the private rented sector, are not good enough and the Council is using its various powers of intervention, enforcement, and programmes of encouragement and information to mitigate this. Around half of the assessed affordable housing need per year since 2005 has been met through planning or other intervention processes, but the gap between demand and supply is widening. Housing, therefore, still remains a major challenge for the Council and its partners.
- 65** The approach to improving the environment in a sustainable way is adequate. Performance on environmental issues is mixed with recycling and composting being amongst the best 25 per cent nationally but the cost of waste disposal being in the second worst 25 per cent. To reduce the cost of waste disposal, the re3 long-term waste disposal PFI joint contract with Wokingham and Bracknell Forest Councils, is an example of complex, sustained, multi-authority working led substantially by Reading Council. The first stages of this project have been delivered successfully, The Council and partners have also adopted the Nottingham Declaration and NI186 (carbon reduction) as an LAA target. The Council is taking well-considered steps to address environmental improvements but it is too early to judge results.
- 66** The Council is being successful in offering real alternatives to car transport. It is using its ownership of Reading Buses Ltd to support its objectives of improving affordable accessibility to all parts of the community. Passenger numbers on most key routes (Premier Routes) have increased by 20 per cent through reinvestment in quality buses (including innovative bio-methanol buses) and a corridor management approach. In the current year, 37 per cent of all journeys (which in 2001 was 33 per cent) are now made by bus, against a national trend downward. In addition, the Council is leading a TIF bid to Government which involves a range of measures to reduce car travel, and consequently improve congestion and air quality.

Safer and stronger communities

- 67** Reading is a relatively high crime area, even though crime has decreased by some 14 per cent since 2003/04, and this is best quartile performance for all recorded crime types, and the level of fear of crime is just above the regional average. The Council is committed to improving community safety and works well with partners to implement initiatives. The Council supports a range of initiatives to address crime and the fear of crime. The Thriving Neighbourhood Programme targets attention on areas such as Whitley and Kentwood where fear of crime is at its highest. Good use of information identifies the hotspots and a co-ordinated response is taken to implement initiatives such as alley-gating. The Council is aware that a lot of people fear going into the town centre in the evenings. The Cultural Strategy is being developed with a view to alter this perception by encouraging a more varied cultural 'offer' in the town centre. There is an increased focus on the town centre by highlighting six crime types for particular attention. A reduction target for them of 20 per cent has been set. Already a reduction of 24 per cent has been achieved. This is important if the fear of crime is to be reduced.
- 68** Action to address substance misuse is good. The Council is working well with partners to improve the provision of treatment for drug users, including rough sleepers. The numbers treated are above the government set target. Specialist services, such as those for Asian users and for children of drug using parents are being delivered. The Berkshire-wide alcohol harm reduction strategy identifies the gaps in services which partners need to tackle. The Council has a good track record of working with the police to mitigate alcohol related disorder, particularly in Reading town centre. In this way, the Council and its partners are focusing well on prevention as well as enforcement in order to address the problems associated with substance abuse.
- 69** Anti-social behaviour is being reduced. The Council works with the neighbourhood based Anti Social Behaviour Action Groups (ASBAGs) where the key agencies meet to agree the action to be taken to address anti-social behaviour. This is having a positive impact on neighbourhoods and the number of young people being served with Anti-Social Behaviour Orders has reduced. On the Council's housing estates nuisance reports have reduced by 34 per cent. This is important if people are to feel safe in the local neighbourhood.
- 70** The Council is taking effective action to reduce accidents. It is on track to meet road casualty reduction targets of 55 per cent by 2010, and incorporates road safety in education and transport programmes. The number of people killed or seriously injured on Reading's roads is very low when compared to other places. In 2007/08 the number for adults was 34 and for children six. It supports the fire and rescue service in meeting the LAA target for reducing arson and hoax fire calls. Trading Standards promote consumer safety through appliance testing. This helps make Reading a safer place to live and work.

What has been achieved?

- 71** The Council's response to emergencies is well organised and effective. The emergency planning function is shared throughout the Berkshire authorities. Each has a lead role in an element of preparedness and the Chief Executive of West Berkshire acts as the lead officer. The Council adopts a risk assessment approach to ensuring that its processes are in place. Exercises are carried out to test these and training is provided for all people involved. The Council learns from the exercises and actual events. A change in the way that sand bags are distributed is now in place following the recent flooding. However, not all directorates' business continuity plans are up to date, and this may inhibit the Council's response to interruptions in the delivery of its services.
- 72** The Council is strengthening community cohesion. It has a sound knowledge of community cohesion issues in the area and has developed a strategy and action plan to address these with partners. The plan covers a range of services and includes indicators to assess progress. It is linked to other Council initiatives such as the Thriving Neighbourhood Programme, that is addressing poverty and exclusion, and health inequalities initiatives. The Council tackles difficult issues in an inclusive, but purposeful way. A good example is how it is confronting extremist behaviour in a positive way, through its work with local BME community leaders. Overall, the response of people in Reading is positive to how cohesive the community is. The community is not seen to be polarised and 66 per cent of people living in Reading think that it is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well. This is important if the area is to avoid community tensions.

Healthier communities

- 73** The Council and partners deal well with some of the health challenges facing the borough's population. The Council and partners' priorities to improve health match the needs well. Engagement in healthy activities is also improving and joint provision with partners is targeting those at most in need. However, teenage pregnancy rates are high and early death rates from heart disease and strokes are slightly higher than nationally. Also, health inequalities exist in the borough, including people from the poorest parts of the borough living on average six years' less than those in the most affluent parts, despite the general affluence of the borough. And help for younger people with a learning disability to live at home continues to deteriorate.
- 74** The Council's engagement with partners on developing healthier communities is good. The Council and its partners have clear objectives to improve health, particularly through joint work and targets in the LAA. Local Priorities match needs well, and include: to improve the health and well-being of people from all sectors of the local community; and to continue to reduce the gap in life expectancy between the least deprived quintile of wards and the rest of the population. Joint working within the health economy, has recently improved. For example, there is a shared social care and health resource in Whitley in South Reading, which delivers both assessments and ongoing support in this relatively deprived area. The CAB offers outreach work to relieve stress symptoms from this centre, funded by the PCT's Partnership Development Fund.

- 75** Health activities are well targeted to the needs of the borough and are achieving good impact, such as attracting increasing numbers of residents to take part. The smoking cessation scheme that is targeted at BME residents and pregnant mothers from high-incidence wards in Reading are starting to bear some positive results attracting 55 new clients, with results in line with the national average. The South Reading Active England Project, which has achieved 1,787 attendance sessions at the Academy Sport Leisure Centre this year, included 246 new people introduced to sport and activity. The Reading Street Games programme for 8-13 year olds, which delivers doorstep sport in parks and open spaces to targeted communities across Reading, has achieved a 92 per cent increase in participation in 2007/08. Exercise for children is being increased through a range of initiatives. These include increased support on the curriculum, free swimming in school holidays for local children, play initiatives, schools with travel plans, and walking to school initiatives. This has led to increased participation in sport and take up for leisure facilities from target groups.
- 76** Teenage conceptions remain high, and those among 15-17 year olds are consistently above the national average. But targeted preventative initiatives to improve sex and relationship education in schools and improved access to sexual health services is slowing the increase in numbers of conceptions.
- 77** The Council and partners are investing well in healthier lifestyles. The Healthy Workplace Challenge encourages employers to support employees to become more physically active; and the Council's Your Reading Passport encourages people to keep physically and mentally active through initiatives such as discounts for the over 60s, disabled people and those on low incomes for leisure facilities, theatres and events, as well as adult education courses. There were 36,061 discounted visits to leisure facilities alone from April 2007 - May 2008. The number of schools participating in the National Healthy Schools Standards programme has met the national target, with 94 per cent of schools working towards that standard and 56 per cent of schools having already achieved it. The Council and partners are investing in the right issues to encourage healthier lifestyles.
- 78** Despite the general affluence of the borough, health inequalities exist. People from the poorest parts of the borough living on average six years' less than those in the most affluent parts. Help for younger people with a learning disability to live at home continues to deteriorate. Improving access to services for those at the most risk of disadvantage is a key focus for the Council's Thriving Neighbourhood programme. The Council is introducing Children's Centres in the most deprived areas across the borough to provide integrated care and education for young children, health services, family support and a base for child minders. Following a wide-ranging consultation with the local community, a Health and Wellbeing centre will be opened in West Reading in January 2009, which will offer a range of child- and family-focused services from health, social care and the voluntary sector. At the moment however, not all residents are enjoying the benefits of Reading's strong economic position.

Older people

- 79** The Council and its partners are providing a good and improving service to older people. The councillor nominated as the older people's champion is focused on the wider agenda for older people and is developing plans for how services can be improved, particularly in partnership with the voluntary and community sector. This gives an organisational focus on improvement.
- 80** The latest Ageing Well strategy report (May 2008) demonstrates an understanding of the needs of older people and maps the services already meeting those needs. The report covers a range of issues - demography, geographical distribution of the borough's older population, living arrangements, ethnicity, housing, health, labour market participation, income, wealth and deprivation and education. It therefore adopts an approach that goes beyond adult social care and is being used to inform council and PCT developments. It is being used as a basis for an incremental approach to addressing gaps in service.
- 81** The Council and partners take positive and appropriate action after consulting older people. The Council undertakes meaningful engagement with older people and their representative groups through a range of activities, including an older people's consultative network. For example, in the consultation for 'Modernising Services for Older People' over 800 people stated what they wanted from the service. This feedback guided the Council's priorities for older people within the Ageing Well strategy and also matched well the Government's intentions for older people set out in 'Our Health, Our Care, Our Say'. As a consequence, the Council, with its partners, is disinvesting in outdated models of residential care and reinvesting in extra care sheltered housing schemes; the Southcote facility is already opened and four more are being planned. One of the strongest messages to emerge from recent consultations is that older people in the community want to have more opportunity to socialise and participate in activities together in local venues, to tackle isolation and loneliness amongst older people. The Council is therefore expanding its range of services in local community groups through activities such as physical exercise, tai chi, games, quizzes, sports, talks and information sessions.

- 82** Services to older people are adequate and improving. Joint work with the PCT, led by the Council's older people's champion led to a reduction in delayed transfers of care from hospital; by jointly funding a team of social care workers based in the Royal Berkshire Hospital to help support a safe and timely discharge for clients. Rates of delayed discharges are now amongst the best in the region. Domestic abuse is being addressed through implementation of the Domestic Abuse Strategy, by the work of the elder abuse teams and through activities in older people's luncheon clubs, including BME residents. Intermediate care is provided by the Council at Tanfield for assessment and this features a multi-disciplinary team who may be district nurses, occupational therapists or domiciliary care staff. This means that assessments are locality-based rather than solely hospital-based. Intermediate care assessments are speeding assessments for older people though the speed of these assessments still takes longer than average to achieve. Work with the pension service has increased take up of benefits by 23 per cent over the last year. Bus services are well used by older people and help promote independence; levels of satisfaction with bus services are particularly high among this age group Overall, older people are receiving a better range of services though some are recent and some still below average.

Children and young people

- 83** Outcomes for children and young people in Reading are in most cases adequate. Performance against most key health indicators is in line with national averages. Health outcomes for looked after children and young people are good. However, teenage pregnancies continue to be well above the national average. Safeguarding performance against several key child protection indicators is poor and significantly worse than statistical neighbours. Standards in primary schools are not yet high enough, but are rising faster at Key Stage 2 than in similar authorities. In secondary schools, the proportion of pupils achieving five or more good GCSE passes (including English and mathematics) has improved significantly over the last two years and is in line with the national average.
- 84** Service management in Reading is adequate. Ambitions for children and young people are adequate and a clear long-term vision for the future has been agreed by partners. The Children's Trust is providing effective leadership and prioritisation is adequate and based on an extensive analysis of need. Planning documents for children and young people's services vary in quality. Capacity is adequate and inter-agency collaboration in service delivery is improving. The partnership is strengthening its approach to commissioning. Performance management to support safeguarding and to reduce teenage conception is inadequate. The leadership and management of the youth service are now satisfactory.

What has been achieved?

- 85** The combined work of all local services in securing the health of children and young people is adequate. The long-term pattern of health needs is well understood in the area. However, strategies and actions to reduce teenage conception are inadequate. The provision of sex and relationship education is inconsistent and not meeting the needs of young people. Waiting times for child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) appointments have been reduced, but progress towards fully implementing a comprehensive integrated CAMHS service has slowed. Good advice and support is offered to parents and carers at an early stage to help them to keep children healthy. Support to keep looked after children healthy is good.
- 86** Safeguarding of children and young people is inadequate, with significant weaknesses in fundamental elements of child protection arrangements. The Local Safeguarding Children Board is ineffective. Multi-agency preventative work and support for some of the broader aspects of safeguarding are good. The local authority has a good range of initiatives to deter, and improve the reporting of, bullying and arrangements to track children missing education have improved significantly over the last two years and are now good. Preventative work to deter exclusion from school is much improved and good progress has been made in reducing the number of permanent and fixed-term exclusions. A high proportion of looked after children live in family placements and are well cared for. However, high turnover of social workers creates a lack of continuity in these children's lives.
- 87** The impact of all local services in helping children and young people to enjoy their education and to achieve well is adequate. Efforts to address weaknesses in primary education, including improving school leadership and standards in literacy, are bearing fruit. Targeted support has helped to reduce some gaps in school attainment levels. However, achievement of many black and minority ethnic groups and white working class pupils continues to be below their peers at all key stages. The number of young people leaving school with no qualifications has reduced and is now much closer to the national average. Provision in mainstream secondary schools for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is comparatively good, although this is not the case in primary schools. Attendance at school is satisfactory overall. It continues to improve in the primary schools and is good in secondary schools. Persistent absence remains low.
- 88** The impact of all local services in helping children and young people to contribute to society is good. Young people with disabilities and from different ethnic groups participate well in youth work. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are well supported by specialist workers. The number of looked after children contributing to their reviews is now in line with statistical neighbours. Leisure and recreation provision is adequate. Within the youth service, a pro-active approach to equality and diversity issues has resulted in good levels of participation by vulnerable groups such as young carers and young people with disabilities and/or from different ethnic groups. Reasonable steps are taken to seek young people's views on services.

- 89** The impact of all local services in helping children and young people achieve economic well-being is adequate. The local authority and its partners have made adequate progress in implementing their 14–19 strategy and provision for the new Diploma is being well-managed. The proportion of young people achieving Level 2 qualifications by age 19 remains below the national average, but is improving. The local authority and its partners recognise that there is still work to be done to ensure that all schools are offering an appropriate 14–19 curriculum that fully meets young people’s needs. Careers education and guidance provided by schools are of mixed quality. The proportion of 16–18 year olds not in education, employment or training exceeds that nationally, but has fallen over the last three years.
- 90** The capacity of the local authority’s services to improve is adequate. The local authority has now acknowledged the seriousness of the safeguarding problems and is implementing a well-funded six-month action plan to tackle these.

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 Reading Borough Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 16 September to 27 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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