

Corporate Assessment

Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council
January 2009



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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?

- 3 Achievement considered against the shared priorities of:
 - sustainable communities and transport;
 - safer and stronger communities;
 - healthier communities;
 - older people; and
 - children and young people.
- 4 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.

- 5 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

- 6 Oldham Council is performing adequately overall. With its partners, it now has clear ambitions and priorities and it provides good community leadership on the borough's interests in Greater Manchester. However, progress in recent years has been slow and the borough continues to face significant challenges. Quality of life in Oldham continues to be below average and improvements in the Council's services lag behind performance elsewhere. Although it has been slow to modernise, the Council now has stronger political leadership and better human resources and performance management frameworks as foundations for improvement.
- 7 Disturbances in 2001 occurred at a time when service performance was below average and the Council was weak as an organisation. To address these problems, the Council had three key themes to guide its activities: regeneration, community cohesion and service excellence. It has now developed sufficiently to begin to integrate its approaches on these three fronts, realising that better quality of life delivered through regeneration and improved services will help community cohesion.
- 8 The ambitions of the Council and its partners now provide a coherent way to address the challenges for the future of the borough. The borough's communities are segregated more than in most places, and the Council is using key strategies to encourage much greater integration of separate communities. Partners have a strong focus on raising the aspirations of young people and demonstrate a clear understanding of the relationship between raising educational attainment and social regeneration, wellbeing and cohesion. There are ambitious aims to improve the skills of local people so that they can compete for jobs within Greater Manchester and for improved access into and out of the borough by public transport. Housing plans address the need for a greater variety of tenure and promote cohesion.
- 9 The Council is an effective community leader for Oldham in the Greater Manchester sub-region, active in the development of city region plans which are crucial to the success of the partners' ambitions. Within Oldham, partners are working well together, respecting each other's roles and responsibilities and joining together to deliver shared ambitions and priorities. However, they are not doing enough to change the negative image of the borough.
- 10 In spite of the new clarity, the ambitions are not always clear to local people, who do not always feel that consultation is effective. Some people feel that they are not communicated with or listened to by the Council. The Council is not clear enough in its communications with local people about the differences in quality of life between groups and localities or about their different priorities and needs, and so it cannot explain its actions in response clearly enough.

- 11 New leadership across the political parties is proactively tackling problems. Partnership working is good. Councillors are being supported well to carry out their roles. The Council has good arrangements for managing its staff and a sound approach to diversity. However, corporate officer leadership of the organisation has been weak. The Council's pace of improvement has been slow, it suffers from a lack of coordination, it is often slow to get things done and it has been slow to introduce modern systems.
- 12 The Council has successfully tackled some poor performance in its services. There is a sound and well supported performance management framework and regular reporting of performance. Some elements of the framework are not fully implemented and service user views are not adequately reflected. Financial capacity and value for money are adequate but the Council's budgets face significant challenges. Financial planning is not fully aligned to the corporate objectives and the Council cannot demonstrate sufficiently how it is funding its priorities.
- 13 The Council and its partners are achieving some results against their ambitions for improving the quality of life in Oldham. Major development projects and programmes are supporting the local economy, raising skill levels in the local workforce, pursuing large-scale intervention into the housing market, delivering improved local neighbourhood services and green spaces, and making the borough more sustainable.
- 14 The Council is working well with partners to tackle high crime levels, implementing a number of effective actions to reduce crime and achieving some success in the treatment of drug addicts. Deaths and injuries from fire and road accidents are reducing.
- 15 Reducing health inequalities and improving lifestyles are key priorities for the Council and its partners and effective partnership working is now delivering some results. The Council and its partners are targeting their interventions in areas and communities where health inequalities are highest, but the health inequalities gap between Oldham and the national average is widening. For older people, the Council's focus is on health and social care, but there are some examples of a wider range of services. There is an increasing level of consultation with older people. Adult social care services have shown significant improvement.
- 16 Outcomes for children and young people in Oldham are improving and are now generally in line with, or better than, in similar areas. Significant improvements have been made to the quality of social care. Good arrangements are in place to ensure that children in need of protection are identified and supported. Looked after children are well cared for and they live in stable placements. A clear focus on equality and diversity issues ensures the needs of the majority of children and young people are met.

Areas for improvement

- 17 The Council should build on improvements in community leadership, partnership working and in the way it works to increase the pace of improvement in the quality of life in Oldham, to narrow and if possible eliminate the gap with other parts of the country. It should increase its efforts where gaps in the quality of life are greatest, for example in health. It should continue to focus on improving cohesion through a more coordinated strategic approach.
- 18 The Council should enable a much better pace of change and improvement by tackling departmental and organisational cultures and structures which are acting as barriers to modernisation and improvement. It needs to work much more corporately and to introduce strong and clear accountabilities. It should clarify the respective roles of councillors and officers, ensuring that senior councillors support political leaders in providing clear corporate and strategic leadership. It should build on the good foundations it has in human resources management, diversity and performance management, using these to build a more coordinated and dynamic organisational culture. In doing all of this, it should learn from good practice already in place in parts of its operations.
- 19 As a matter of urgency the Council should tackle the weaknesses in its financial management and ensure that its arrangements for value for money, risk and asset management and procurement become better than adequate. It should link performance and financial management, in particular to set budget savings beside service priorities so that stakeholders can see how key priorities will be supported and sustained.
- 20 The Council has a sound performance management framework which is not fully operational or robust. To enable the framework to work effectively in driving improvement across all services, the Council should improve the quality of action planning, the monitoring of action plans, the quality of performance data and the involvement of service users in performance management.
- 21 The Council should do much more, with its partners, to promote a positive and meaningful image for Oldham within and outside the borough. In doing so, it should recognise and respect the different communities within Oldham as part of its positive identity.

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

- 22** The borough of Oldham lies on the north east of the Greater Manchester conurbation. The western half of the borough is close to the city of Manchester and is urban in character, containing the towns of Oldham, Shaw, Chadderton, Royton, Failsworth and Hollinwood. The rural area of Saddleworth in the east consists of small villages, moorland, hills and deep valleys. Almost a quarter of the borough lies within the Peak District National Park. The town of Oldham is the largest in the borough and provides its administrative centre.
- 23** The population of the borough is about 219,500. About 14.5 per cent of the population is over 65, lower than the national average; this proportion is expected to increase to 17 per cent by 2022. The proportion of the borough's population which is from black and ethnic minority (BME) groups is expected to grow from 16.6 per cent to over 19 per cent in 2012 and to a quarter of the total in 2022; the proportion of children from BME groups is predicted to rise from about one third to almost four in ten by 2022. Population density is high in the urban west of the borough, but low and dispersed in the rural east. In the centre of the borough, BME and white communities are concentrated in separate localities.
- 24** The local economy was founded on the cotton industry. This has disappeared, leaving a legacy of large mills most of which lie empty. The Oldham economy today is mainly low-skilled, with a lower proportion of professional and managerial jobs than the regional and national averages. Some manufacturing remains, including high tech industries. There is a growing further and higher education sector.
- 25** Large parts of the borough have suffered as a result of the decline of traditional industries. Despite some areas of affluence, particularly in the east of the borough, prosperity compares poorly with the rest of the country. Oldham is the 42nd most deprived of the 354 local authority areas in England (based on the average scores in 2007) and the 23rd most deprived in terms of local concentration of deprivation. The employment rate and average wage levels are both lower than regional and national averages. Car ownership is low. Unemployment in the four urban wards of Alexandra, Coldhurst, St Mary's and Werneth is twice the average for the borough as a whole; in these wards, income deprivation and child poverty have worsened in the last four years.
- 26** The health of people in Oldham is generally worse than average in England, with some significant health inequalities. There are differences of up to 12 years in life expectancy between the most deprived and most affluent areas of the borough; Oldham has the 410th lowest (out of 432) life expectancy for men, and the gap between life expectancy in Oldham and the average for England is not narrowing. The rate of deaths from heart disease and stroke is the fourth worst in England and getting worse.

- 27 Education and skill levels are generally below regional and national averages. In 2006/07 (latest available data), there were improvements at Key Stage 2, where results in mathematics improved to above the average for national and similar authorities, but attainment at Key Stages 1 and 3 and the numbers attaining GCSE 5A* to C including English and mathematics remained below the average nationally and in similar authorities. The percentage of economically active adults in Oldham without a level 2 qualification is improving slowly but in 2006/07 was still higher than regional and national percentages. However, the numbers of young people aged 16 to 18 who were in education, employment or training improved to above the average for similar authorities.
- 28 There is a mismatch between housing supply and demand. The urban areas of the borough contain a high proportion of tightly packed 19th century terraced houses which do not meet local needs for housing type or condition. Better housing in the east of the borough is unaffordable to many residents and demand for social housing is therefore high.
- 29 The borough is close to the major road links of the M62 trans-Pennine route and the M60 Manchester ring road, but there are few major transport routes into and across the borough.

The Council

- 30 The current administration is led by the Liberal Democrats, who took over from a Labour-led administration (which had control from May 2003) in May 2008. The Liberal Democrats hold 30 seats; the Labour party has 22 seats, the Conservatives hold seven seats and there is one Independent councillor.
- 31 The Council's Cabinet of ten (nine Liberal Democrats and one Labour member) contains portfolios for external relations (the Leader); adult services and health; children, young people and families; community services and housing; customer services and Unity partnership; environment and infrastructure; finance and resources; people and communities; and regeneration. The tenth member is the Labour member and has no portfolio; he has a key function to provide a link between the shadow Cabinet and the Cabinet and to challenge other portfolio holders.
- 32 Scrutiny has been delivered through a Management Board and a Performance and Value for Money Select Committee, with task and finish Project Panels undertaking scrutiny work. At the time of this inspection, a new scrutiny structure was being introduced, to provide a Management Board to manage the overview and scrutiny work programme, a Performance and Value for Money Select Committee, and four Select Groups, for Health and Wellbeing; Economic Prosperity; Safer and Stronger Communities; and Education, Skills and Training. There are ten Area Committees; the new administration is increasing their role by devolving some powers to them.

Context

- 33 There are about 5000 staff in five directorates: Strategy and Resources; Children, Young People and Families; Adult and Community Services; Regeneration; and Environmental Services; there are also about 5400 staff in schools. The Chief Executive leads a Strategic Management Team (SMT) of the five directors plus the Director of Finance, the Director of Legal and Democratic Services and the Managing Director of the Unity Partnership. At the time of this inspection, the Chief Executive was due to leave the Council for another post; a new Chief Executive was due to start shortly after the end of the inspection.
- 34 The Council's revenue budget in 2008/09 is £195.066 million and the capital programme totals £48.499 million. The gross budget is approximately £477 million. Council Tax for band D properties is £1477 in 2008/09.
- 35 The Council's 14,000 houses are predominantly managed by First Choice Homes, which is an Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO). 1500 homes for elderly tenants are being provided by Housing21 under a Private Finance Initiative (PFI) scheme which is nearing completion, and 600 larger homes are being provided by a second PFI scheme. Oldham and Rochdale Councils jointly manage a Housing Market Renewal project which covers parts of both boroughs. Leisure facilities are managed by a leisure trust, Oldham Community Leisure Ltd. The Council and a private sector company together form the Unity Partnership, a joint venture company created in 2007 which currently delivers revenues, benefits, IT, property, highways management and customer contact services. There is a range of providers for social care, including significant input by voluntary and community sector organisations.
- 36 The Oldham Partnership is the Local Strategic Partnership. It has an Executive, chaired by the principal of Oldham Sixth Form College, and a Steering Group, chaired by a local resident. These are supported by five Partnership Boards, for Safer and Stronger Communities; Housing; Economic Development and Enterprise; Health and Wellbeing; and Children and Young People. The Partnership has a Sustainable Communities Strategy 2008 to 2020 which contains the Local Area Agreement 2008 to 2011. The Strategy was first adopted in 2002; it was revised in 2005 and was then renewed and relaunched with the borough's second LAA in early summer 2008.
- 37 Oldham is one of the ten Greater Manchester boroughs, which work together as the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA). The ten boroughs are the full members of the Greater Manchester City Region, which has developed a Multi-Area Agreement which was agreed with the government in July 2008 and is responsible for the Transport Innovation Fund bid for Greater Manchester which includes extensions to the Metrolink tram and proposals for congestion charging.

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

Ambition

- 38** The Council is performing adequately in this area. With its partners it now has consistent and challenging ambitions for the borough which are framed around raising aspirations and making the borough a place that everyone can be proud of. The Council's Citizens' Plan clearly reflects these ambitions and acts as the Council's delivery plan for the partners' ambitions. The new ambitions are based on consultation with local people and organisations, but consultation is not always seen by local people to be effective and the ambitions do not sufficiently reflect the different nature of localities within the borough. Communication of the ambitions to promote a sense of identity in Oldham is uncoordinated and lacks vision.
- 39** Ambitions have not been expressed consistently until the introduction of the new Local Area Agreement (LAA) and the Council's new corporate plan (the Citizens' Plan) in Spring 2008. Since 2002 the ambitions have centred on the need to transform the borough and raise the aspirations of its citizens, but they have been expressed differently in different strategic documents. The different and changing ways that the Council and its partners have reflected their ambitions during the years since 2002 have made it difficult for local people and organisations to understand what it is they have been trying to achieve.
- 40** Ambitions are now set out clearly. The development of the second LAA in 2008 has acted as a catalyst for the partners to bring together the various strands into a more coherent approach. At the top level, the integrated SCS and LAA, the Oldham Beyond regeneration vision and the Citizens' Plan align Council and Oldham Partnership ambitions. The overarching vision, expressed as 'Creating better life opportunities and a place where everyone is proud to belong' is supported by the ambition of 'transforming people and place'. The SCS and LAA have three main themes: economic prosperity, safe and strong communities and health and well-being; these link well to national priorities. The revised Oldham Beyond vision and the Council's Citizens' Plan have adopted the same three main themes. This means that the Council and its partners now have a coherent expression of the ambitions to guide their planning, resourcing and delivery.

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

- 41 The ambitions are challenging for the borough. They reflect the long term vision of the Council and its partners to transform the borough and in particular to raise aspirations. This is combined with an awareness that the borough's economy is unlikely to provide sufficient jobs for local people, and the Council and its partners are therefore looking to the sub-region and beyond for employment opportunities. There are ambitious aims to improve the educational attainment and skills of local people so that they can compete for these jobs and for improved access into and out of the borough by public transport. Housing Market Renewal plans address the need for a greater variety of tenure and promote cohesion. The ambitions and key strategies now provide a coherent way to address the challenges for the future of the borough.
- 42 Partners have a strong focus on raising the aspirations of young people and demonstrate a clear understanding of the relationship between raising educational attainment and social regeneration, wellbeing and community cohesion. The theme of 'Regeneration through Education' is widely supported. The Council's proposals in its Building Schools for the Future (BSF) project, the new University College Oldham (part of Huddersfield University) and the two excellent further education colleges in the borough all demonstrate the partners' ambitions to increase aspirations and provide local opportunities for young people to gain high level qualifications. The focus on science, exemplified by the firm plans for the new Science Centre at Oldham Sixth Form College, is based on the ambition to give young people the necessary skills to compete for 21st century careers in science and technology in the growing Greater Manchester market. The partners' ambitions for raising aspirations are therefore well focused and the foundations for their achievement are in place.
- 43 There are weaknesses in the way the ambitions are defined. The Sustainable Communities Strategy and the LAA define the ambitions only in general terms beyond three years, without longer term milestones and targets, and their detail is not always shared by all stakeholders. The Oldham Beyond vision for the regeneration of the borough is a key driver but the longer term outcomes which it seeks to achieve are outlined only in broad terms, and this leaves room for confusion. For example, while there is a clear recognition of the need to improve skills for access to jobs, the understanding of where these jobs should be is not always shared by councillors or by local residents. Without clarity for the longer term, it is difficult for stakeholders to fully understand the longer term ambitions and for partners to plan effectively.
- 44 The strategic framework is not robust. Too many action plans are incomplete or lack targets. For example, some community safety strategies are not fully supported by clear action plans; the preventative strategy for children is still in draft; the community cohesion strategy, agreed in spring 2008, has no targets; and the action plan for the Partnership's communications strategy is incomplete. The absence of robust and consistent action planning limits the ability of the Council and its partners to plan coherently for the delivery of the ambitions and to measure progress.

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

- 45 Communication of the ambitions is uncoordinated and lacks vision. The Council and its partners are conscious of the borough's negative image, internally and externally, and of the need to improve this in order to achieve the shared ambitions. In spring 2008 they launched a new brand, 'One Oldham'. There is no strategic approach to using the brand to promote a new image of the borough or to celebrate the diversity of its communities; there is no communications strategy attached to the brand. There is some use of the new logo but this is not comprehensive. There is little work to make the image more than a badge and no systematic approach to the cultural change necessary within the Council to give meaning to the new image. There is therefore little understanding of what the new logo represents and little change so far in the image of the borough. Without a more positive and meaningful image, the Council's efforts to create a more positive view of the borough and of itself among local people and investors are weakened.
- 46 Although the Council and its partners have included the views of local people in the development of their ambitions, consultation is not always seen by local people to be effective. The original Oldham Beyond regeneration vision (2002) was based on a comprehensive review of strengths, weaknesses and possibilities for the area and drew on extensive consultation. The SCS was directly influenced by Oldham Beyond and by further consultation. The partners have used a range of consultation mechanisms to build up a clearer picture of perceptions about community cohesion and consultation with BME groups has been effective. However, housing tenants and older people feel that they are not communicated with or listened to, and in 2006 (latest national data) 62 per cent of residents saw the Council as remote and impersonal, among the worst results for larger councils in England. While there are examples of good engagement, the Council does not do enough to make sure that local people feel it is communicating with and listening to them.
- 47 The Council is an effective community leader for Oldham in the Greater Manchester sub-region. It is active in the sub-region, including in the development of city region plans, the MAA and the Transport Innovation Fund proposals which are crucial to the success of the partners' ambitions. The Council's transport ambitions link well with national and local priorities, with clear outcomes for the five year period derived from the Greater Manchester Integrated Transport Strategy, and it has led well on the complex procurement process for the new Greater Manchester waste disposal contract.

Prioritisation

- 48 The Council is performing adequately in this area. New clarity provided by the Citizens' Plan is enabling stakeholders to understand the Council's priorities for action. The Council and its partners have a good understanding of the borough and its communities on which to base these priorities. However, the Council is not explicit about the priorities and needs of different areas of the borough or different groups within local communities. Arrangements are not fully in place to ensure that the priorities inform all of the Council's activities, and financial planning is not fully aligned to the corporate objectives.

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

- 49 The Council now has a clear and consistent set of high-level priorities to guide its activities but these are very new and not yet fully embedded in the Council's operations. The new Citizens' Plan, the successor to the Corporate Plan, was developed in spring 2008 as the Council's delivery plan for the SCS and LAA, and is supported by all political parties. It has the same themes as the SCS and LAA, referring to them as 'corporate objectives' and adding a fourth corporate objective of 'excellent services'. Each corporate objective identifies three sub-objectives; against each of these are a small group of outcome targets with key projects for their achievement. The targets are set out as one-year and three-year targets and the Plan will be updated annually. It is presented in very clear and accessible format, replacing a much more complex corporate plan in which there were many priorities. The new clarity is enabling stakeholders to understand the Council's priorities for action.
- 50 The partners have a good understanding of the borough derived from an extensive range of detailed data, including consultation evidence and thorough research and analysis at partnership and organisational levels, and have used this in the development of plans. The development of the Children and Young People's Plan included good consultation with local young people including those from BME communities, children with disabilities and disaffected white boys. The Council's Equalities Scheme is based on consultation with residents and with staff and in its turn provides guidance for directorates on their consultations with residents.
- 51 However, the Council's priorities do not sufficiently reflect the different nature of localities within the borough or the needs, views and aspirations of the different social and geographic communities. Community cohesion has been a key priority for the Council, its partners and local communities since 2001, and the Council has worked hard to address threats to cohesion within the borough. There is a range of good work with young people to promote cohesion, for example through sport and in the Youth Service's Fusion project. However, the Council's formal plans are not explicit about local communities' sense of place and identity or about the differences in quality of life between groups and localities. The Council does not report publicly on how it is responding to the diverse needs of different communities and groups or on its progress in reducing inequalities. This contributes to local people's sense that the Council does not listen, and is leading to some lack of focus in the Council's own plans: the new community cohesion strategy contains many priorities but does not prioritise action to address important and continuing cohesion issues.
- 52 The Council and its partners are now developing a more integrated approach to community cohesion. Plans for education, green spaces, transport and housing all reflect a realisation that cohesion will be promoted and addressed by improving the quality of life and enabling communities to become more integrated. Strategic plans for housing, through Housing Market Renewal, for education, through Building Schools for the Future, and for transport, through the pan-Manchester Transport Innovation Fund bid, all recognise this aim. However, this integration is not complete; for example, the Economy and Enterprise Strategy does not refer to community cohesion, although the Community Cohesion Strategy asserts that this link is made. The Council recognises the greater potential impact on cohesion of linking key quality of life strategies, but does not yet have a complete approach.

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

- 53** Individual services have responded well for the most part to research data and consultation but the Council does not have sufficiently robust arrangements to ensure that this happens consistently. Engagement with the local Inter-faith Forum and Council of Mosques led to more flexible burial services to accommodate the cultural and religious needs of all Oldham's communities. There is increasing provision for choice: social care is provided through individualised budgets, there are choice-based lettings for housing, and the new refuse collection arrangements are sufficiently flexible to accommodate individual needs, for example of elderly people. The Oldham Partnership has recognised that geographically based funding excludes some people in need and has moved to targeting need using data and intelligence, for example in identifying people on Incapacity Benefit for support back into work. There are plans and some work in progress to improve local town centres, responding to residents' strong identification with their own town. However, service needs assessments and equalities impact assessments carried out by the Council's services vary in quality; some are superficial or do not recognise the needs of different groups. The Council cannot be sure that its services are effectively and consistently meeting the needs of individual groups and communities across the borough.
- 54** Local arrangements provide a response to the priorities of neighbourhoods and local areas but are not always co-ordinated. Area Committees have small budgets for local projects; their role is being expanded to include some devolved powers and increased budgets. Locality managers for environmental services, Police and Community Support Officers for community safety and Neighbourhood Access and Prevention Officers for social care services support the Council's increasingly localised responses to local need, but they all have different reporting arrangements and accountabilities. This means that the Council is not managing its local neighbourhood resources to provide the most efficient or most productive response to local priorities.
- 55** Financial planning is not fully aligned to the corporate objectives. The Council refreshed its medium term financial strategy with the introduction of the new Citizens' Plan and the 2008/09 budget. Although consultation on priorities informs the budget process, the budget and medium term financial plan for 2008 to 2011 are focused on the financial achievement of Council Tax commitments rather than explicitly addressing the delivery of corporate objectives. There have been recent improvements in linking finance and business planning, with some financial information in directorate service improvement plans, but these are not fully embedded. Resources for the delivery of the Children and Young People's Plan are identified for one year only. The delivery of the medium term financial strategy is dependent on achieving significant efficiencies, but the Council is not explicitly aligning proposed budget cuts to priorities. The Council cannot demonstrate sufficiently how it is funding its priorities.
- 56** Awareness of the corporate objectives varies among councillors and staff. Front line staff have an adequate understanding of the focus and direction of the Council and of what the corporate objectives mean for their jobs. Managers appreciate the new clarity and how this informs their roles. However, the 'service excellence' priority is not clear to managers or to staff. Some portfolio holders are clear about the objectives and how these relate to their portfolios; others are not so aware and focus on local issues of detail rather than the strategic priorities of the Council. The new corporate objectives are not yet guiding all of the Council's activities.

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

- 57 Partners are working well together, respecting each other's roles and responsibilities and joining together to deliver shared ambitions and priorities. The Oldham Partnership has new arrangements to deliver the LAA through its own Commissioning Unit, which will manage the Area Based Grant either directly or through partnerships such as that for children and young people's services. The Council gives active support to this Unit. Council grant aid to voluntary and community organisations is awarded in line with Council priorities.
- 58 The Council has been able to make difficult decisions in support of its priorities. The previous administration introduced fortnightly bin collections to increase recycling, and the new administration confirmed the arrangements; this decision was unpopular and difficult to take, particularly at the time of a local election.

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

Capacity

- 59 The Council is performing adequately in this area. New leadership across the political parties is proactively tackling problems faced by the borough and the Council, but corporate officer leadership of change and improvement has been weak and the organisation suffers from a lack of coordination. There are good human resource management arrangements, a sound approach to diversity and good partnership working, but the Council has been slow to introduce modern systems. Financial capacity is adequate but faces significant challenges.
- 60 Political leadership is now good. The Leader is providing clear direction. New leadership across the political parties is proactively tackling the problems faced by the borough and the Council and is developing an open and inclusive style. Information is shared between political groups, Cabinet includes an opposition councillor and opposition councillors chair two key scrutiny groups. There is good dialogue at leadership level and most portfolio holders are in close liaison with their shadow colleagues. Good political leadership is helping the capacity of the Council to deliver its ambitions and priorities.
- 61 Beyond the leadership, political capacity is adequate but there are some weaknesses in the way governance arrangements work in practice. The Council is providing good support to develop the capacity of its councillors through a comprehensive training and development programme in which participation is good. Decision making is transparent, there is a sound ethical framework and delegations, although extensive, operate satisfactorily. Overview and scrutiny has not provided consistent and effective challenge to the Cabinet but it has had some impact, for example in fostering, in homelessness, and in scrutinising the development of the LAA. The respective roles and responsibilities of councillors and officers are sometimes confused: some councillors focus too much on operational detail which is the responsibility of officers. Councillors are not sufficiently challenging to officers, who too often set the agenda. Councillors are not always provided with timely or sufficient information by officers, for example in connection with the significant problems of the new financial system. The effect of these confusions and weaknesses is to undermine a clear focus at all political levels on the delivery of the priorities.

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

- 62 Senior officers provide good leadership within the borough and within Greater Manchester. The outgoing Chief Executive has been active and persistent in working with partners to respond to community cohesion issues. He has engaged fully with the Oldham Partnership to support its development and worked well with partners. He has led the AGMA Chief Executive's Group effectively. This has enabled the Council to play an effective role in pursuing the interests of Oldham and of Greater Manchester.
- 63 Corporate leadership within the organisation has been weak. Although significant progress has been made within some directorates, SMT has not driven change and improvement at sufficient pace and the organisation suffers from a lack of coordination. Directorates work independently, with duplication of effort and resources for most support services including property management. Some functions - for example cultural services - are handled in several directorates. Consultation activity is not coordinated. Internal communications, although improved, are 'top down' rather than two-way. Without strong corporate leadership, the Council is limiting its capacity to deliver improvement and risks wasting resources.
- 64 The Council is often slow to get things done and has been slow to introduce modern management systems: at the time of this inspection, a new finance system was in the process of implementation almost a year late, to replace a 20 year old system; the corporate HR system was installed only in 2007; and the new performance management and customer relationship management (CRM) systems were not yet operational. There have been significant problems of incompatibility between the HR system and the new finance system. The introduction of several key systems at the same time presents challenges to the Council's capacity to implement them effectively, but without effective modern systems the Council's ability to deliver its priorities efficiently and effectively is weakened.
- 65 The Council has sound human resource (HR) management arrangements which provide good support to managers and staff. There is a very good training and development programme, including management development, professional qualifications and basic skills. Staff access to training is good. HR policies and support include organisational development and change management, drawing learning from successful development and change management in the Adult and Community Services directorate. A quarterly Management Forum keeps managers up to date with developments. Relationships with the trade unions are good, and equal pay negotiations in connection with single status have been completed; settlements have been made with affected staff.
- 66 However, there are some challenges to the capacity of the workforce. The Council has not taken action until very recently to analyse staffing levels and at the time of this inspection, it was carrying a significant number of funded vacancies. There is no corporate workforce planning although there are pockets of good practice in the Adult and Community Services and Children Young People and Families directorates. There are difficulties in recruitment to HR, planning and senior finance posts. Sickness levels are very high at an average 11.5 days for each employee in 2007/08; comprehensive new sickness absence procedures to address this problem are not yet applied consistently by managers. This means that the Council cannot be confident that it has the staff it needs to deliver its priorities.

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

- 67 The approach to equal opportunities and diversity is sound, although this is not reflected in the Council's staffing profile. There has been considerable work on these issues, with corporate leadership, equality champions in directorates and knowledge and commitment within the Council, which has achieved level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government. There has been some improvement in the diversity of the workforce but overall it still does not reflect the local community and the Council compares relatively poorly with other councils; the percentages of its workforce who are from ethnic minority communities and of disabled staff are below average.
- 68 Financial capacity has been adequate but has some weaknesses and now faces considerable challenge. Medium term financial planning is in place and the Council has delivered a balanced budget for the last three years. It has achieved the level of efficiencies required by national Government, and its approach to value for money is adequate. Financial management has been hindered by delays in introducing the new financial management system and by weaknesses in financial staff capacity including vacancies in key financial management posts. The Council must make £17 million savings in 2009/10 with further significant levels of budget shortfalls in ensuing years. The sustainability of future financial plans for the delivery of the Council's plans is not secure.
- 69 Other arrangements for the management of the Council's resources are adequate and improving. A good corporate approach to risk management has been introduced but this has not yet embedded or been fully aligned with the budget cycle; councillors have had limited involvement and risk management action plans are not being consistently completed on a timely basis. Project management has been strengthened through corporate guidance and business analysts supporting key projects but programme management is not always effective. The Council has an adequate approach to procurement which it is in the process of updating, and it has recently upgraded its contract procedures; it has successfully delivered financial savings through procurement. Asset management is improving from a low base; the Council now has an asset management plan and is improving the information it holds on its property and maintenance backlog. The Council has recently introduced a system of boards to facilitate inter-directorate working on cross-cutting issues and to make strategic links, for example between regeneration and housing. Although progress has been slow, the Council is addressing weaknesses in its arrangements.

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

- 70** The Council works effectively in partnership. It provides support to the voluntary and community sector, guided by the principles set out in Connecting Oldham, the Compact agreement which has been in place since 1999, and has introduced some three-year funding arrangements to provide more stability. There is good work with the LSP on commissioning, although the approach is not responding adequately to the needs of the voluntary sector or local business. There are examples of enhanced capacity through partnership working in community safety and joint work with other organisations, for example with Rochdale Council on housing market renewal and the development of a street lighting PFI. Good integrated working through Positive Steps Oldham - including the provision of sexual health advice and screening by the PCT - is addressing the needs of young people and reducing teenage pregnancies, and there is close working with the PCT on alcohol abuse, obesity and mental health. The Unity Partnership is delivering improvements in services; although it currently handles only a small proportion of the Council's transactional services, the Partnership is working with the Council to develop proposals for the transfer of more services and is looking at how the Partnership can support improvement in services which are not transferred. Good partnership working is enhancing capacity for delivery of ambitions and priorities.
- 71** Arrangements for access to services have been uncoordinated but are now improving. A contact centre and one stop shop are operated by the Unity Partnership, and there are plans to establish customer access points in local areas. Some key front line services (benefits, waste collection, adult social care and street scene) have improved access and choice, with resulting increases in service user satisfaction. However, there has been no corporate leadership or vision for customer services, and the approach has been uncoordinated and without clear service standards. The Council has established a Customer Services Board and agreed a Customer Services Strategy. It is therefore taking action to address weaknesses in the accessibility of services to local people.

Performance management

- 72** The Council is performing adequately in this area. There is a sound and well supported performance management framework and regular performance reporting. Some elements of the framework are not fully implemented and the links between financial and performance management are weak. Service user views are not adequately reflected.
- 73** The Council has used focused performance management to improve poorly performing services, but the extent of improvement across all services has varied and performance overall is below average. Concerted action in social care has achieved a significant improvement in services for both children and adults. These services were performing very poorly in 2003; adult social care is now rated as good, with excellent prospects for improvement, after gaining better external assessment in almost every year from 2005 to 2008. Recycling performance is being improved from a poor level. The performance of services for children and young people improved faster than the national average in 2007/08. However, performance against many national indicators is below average levels and the Council has fewer indicators performing at top level than average for larger councils.

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

- 74** The Council is responding to the need to improve its performance by improving its performance management framework. The Council's performance management framework, the Oldham Business Planning Process (OBPP) is sound. It sets out the links from the SCS and Citizens' Plan to service planning and staff appraisals. Directorate three-year plans link back to corporate ambition and priorities. Each service within directorates produces an annual Service Improvement Plan, linking to the Directorate Plan and identifying links between service improvement actions and the corporate objectives. There is a similar link to staff appraisals. There are improved arrangements to support the OBPP, with new guidance which is succinct and clear. The structure of performance reports has been improved to present information against Council priorities in a quickly accessible format. This means that the 'golden thread' between strategic aims, planning and performance is well set out and supported.
- 75** Scrutiny and service planning arrangements are focused on the corporate objectives but these are new and not fully implemented. The performance management framework have been revised to reflect the themes of the new corporate objectives and scrutiny committees have been revised to reflect the LAA themes. The restructuring of scrutiny committees and groups is new, coming into effect at the same time as this inspection. The performance management framework very clearly describes the cascade from strategic ambitions through corporate objectives to service priorities, but most of the Directorate three-year plans are still framed around the former priorities. The annual Service Improvement Plans all reference the new objectives. The Council is therefore improving its ability to deliver its priorities through more focused scrutiny and performance management but it is too soon to assess the effectiveness of these new arrangements.
- 76** Monitoring of performance against national performance indicators is carried out regularly and arrangements to manage under-performance are appropriate. Performance review is carried out via a quarterly corporate performance report which goes to SMT, political leadership, Performance and Value for Money Overview and Scrutiny Committee and to Cabinet. Portfolio holders and executive directors are held to account each quarter by the portfolio holder for finance and resources in quarterly performance round table meetings for each portfolio; ad hoc performance clinics are convened to deal with issues of underperformance. Key performance messages are communicated to managers via the quarterly Management Forum and to staff via the Performance Matters staff newsletter. Councillors and senior officers are therefore kept well informed about performance.
- 77** The links between performance and financial management are weak. Performance and financial management are not integrated, although they are on the same agenda at performance round tables. There is no link between performance management and value for money. The current absence of up to date financial monitoring reports is exacerbating this situation and preventing councillors and officers from monitoring financial performance against the budget. Use of benchmarking is limited and is not sufficient to drive improvement in value for money or for performance management; there is much comparison with AGMA authorities but less so beyond. The Council is not managing its financial resources in a way which supports service improvement.

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

- 78 There are other weaknesses in performance management. Data quality is poor. There is weak action planning in some key strategies, for example for community cohesion and anti-social behaviour. Some strategies do not contain performance measures to enable assessment of their effectiveness and there are other gaps, for example an absence of targets, in others. Statutory recommendations issued by the District Auditor in 2007 included the need for the Council to monitor action plans, but progress to improve this has been slow. Directorate three-year plans are inconsistent: they do not all contain outcome targets or financial information, equalities and diversity actions are included in only one, and one plan does not include risk management. These weaknesses limit the effectiveness of performance management.
- 79 The Council opens itself up to external scrutiny but has sometimes been slow to respond to external recommendations. It invited peer review from the Improvement and Development Agency and has taken action in response to most of the recommendations. In 2005 it invited the Institute of Community Cohesion to undertake an independent review of its progress on community cohesion and to make recommendations for improving its community cohesion strategy; it has learnt from this but took a further two years to develop its community cohesion strategy. It has been slow to respond to Audit Commission statutory recommendations on the reporting and internal control of its finances, therefore delaying action to improve the way it works.
- 80 Performance management does not routinely or robustly capture the experiences of service users to inform service improvement. User satisfaction with the Council's handling of complaints is very low and has hardly improved since 2003. Complaints to the contact centre are not recorded in the corporate system. Except in social care for adults and children there is no record of what actions were taken to address complaints or what learning resulted. Although the Council has a range of measures assess overall progress on diversity, a CRM system has only recently been introduced and the absence of equalities information relating to customer complaints has meant that the Council has not been able to monitor service delivery against its equality objectives. This means that the Council cannot be confident that it is delivering services appropriately and according to the needs of its diverse communities.
- 81 The staff appraisal system is used well to provide clarity to staff about their jobs and to identify training needs. The structure of the appraisals varies appropriately in format and focus, but all link back to the corporate objectives. 'Job chats', in simpler format, are provided for manual staff. Employees' contributions to improvement are recognised through the annual Star Awards. The Council's managers are therefore supporting the development of their staff in an appropriate way.
- 82 Performance management arrangements within the Oldham Partnership are mainly sound. The Partnership has a web-based performance management system to which partner organisations contribute their data. Performance management is carried out by thematic partnerships and reports are taken to the Partnership Executive. Reports also go to the Oldham Partnership Steering Group, which includes voluntary sector representatives, but the reports are not presented in a way which enables the Steering Group to carry out rigorous challenge to performance. The partners are committed to managing performance openly and collaboratively but the potential of the Steering Group to add value to the process is not being fully realised.

What has been achieved?

- 83 The Council is performing adequately in this area. With its partners it is making progress against shared national and local priorities, but this is often from a low base and the quality of life in Oldham is still lower than in many other areas. The Council has improved poorly performing services but improvement overall has been slow compared to other councils.
- 84 The themes of the new LAA and Citizens' Plan (economic prosperity, safe and strong communities and health and well-being) are closely linked to national priorities. Until spring 2008 the Council and the Oldham Partnership had a wider range of priorities. From these, the Council identified three key themes: regeneration, community cohesion and service excellence. It can demonstrate achievements against each of these themes, but much remains to be done to realise the ambitions of the partners.
- 85 The quality of life in the borough is improving slowly but overall it is still poorer than average for England. The Council's efforts to regenerate the borough are beginning to deliver results, supporting the local economy; raising skill levels in the local workforce; pursuing large-scale intervention in the housing market; delivering improvement in local neighbourhood services and greenspaces; and making the borough more sustainable. The Council has worked well with partners to reduce crime levels, but these remain high. Good partnership working to improve local people's health is not yet producing results: Oldham residents' health is still on average poorer than in England as a whole, a gap which is widening. However, outcomes for children and young people in Oldham are generally in line with or better than in similar areas, and are improving.
- 86 The Council is balancing a long-term approach to cohesion with active support for initiatives to build stronger communities. Local perceptions are slow to change; in 2008, only 52 per cent of residents believed that people from different backgrounds get on well together in their local area, compared with 54 per cent in the 2006 national indicator survey. However, in 2006 more residents were satisfied with their local area as a place to live - 64 per cent, compared with 39 per cent in 2003.
- 87 Satisfaction with the Council and the overall performance of its services are improving slowly from low bases. In the 2006 national user satisfaction survey, 40 per cent of people were satisfied with the way the Council was running things; although this was among the worst results nationally, it was a significant improvement over 2003, when only 31 per cent were satisfied. Over the three years to 2007/08, improvement in the Council's services as measured by national indicators was below the average level for single tier councils and improvement overall slowed significantly in 2006/07. It recovered in 2007/08 when performance against 64 per cent of indicators improved on the previous year; this was the average rate of improvement for single tier councils. However, only 26 cent of the Council's indicators were among the best performing in 2007/08 (against an average for single tier councils of 29 per cent).

Sustainable communities and transport

- 88** The Council and its partners have a good focus on the need for regeneration and economic development for the sustainability of the borough. Together they are delivering a variety of programmes, successfully drawing on a number of national funding streams. The approach has developed in recent years into a more coordinated response to the challenges faced by the borough. Major development projects and programmes are designed to support the local economy, raise skill levels in the local workforce, pursue large-scale intervention in the housing market, deliver improvement of local neighbourhood services and greenspaces, and make the borough more sustainable. There has been some success in all these areas, despite the challenges of economic decline.
- 89** The Council and its partners are actively addressing the key issue of Oldham's weak economy and are pursuing regeneration strategy and initiatives with vigour. The Oldham Beyond regeneration vision is acting as the key driver across all the partners. The Council's Economy and Enterprise strategy supports this. The Council is pursuing its economic regeneration objectives in a considered way, focusing on improving the skills of local people and identifying key employment sites in the town centre, close to deprived areas and to key road and transport locations.
- 90** The Council and its partners have achieved many of the actions proposed in the Oldham Beyond vision. Sites have been assembled, development partners identified, new business and office premises have been built, and the Council has been active in pursuing the Oldham Beyond vision for the extension of the Greater Manchester light rail link (Metrolink) to Oldham. Schemes delivered by the Council during 2007/08 accounted for 35,000 square metres of new business floorspace, which would equate to 1200 new jobs. Plans are approved for improvements to several local town centres. The Oldham Beyond vision and proposals have acted as a driver for economic regeneration which is having an impact on the borough.
- 91** Progress on some elements of the Oldham Beyond vision has been slow. The transformation of Oldham town centre as a whole has not been realised and re-use of the Old Town Hall has not progressed. Little has been made of the almost unique asset of the 138 former cotton mills that remained in 2004 and which were highlighted in Oldham Beyond as a key project. Although some mills, for example Hollinwood, have been well used, the majority have not, or are in low-value uses. There is no overall strategy to deliver this element of the vision and as a result an opportunity is missed.
- 92** There is a good focus on improving the skills and aspirations of young people to enable them to gain the qualifications necessary for the jobs of the future. Regeneration through Education is a strong theme, exemplified by the expanding University Centre Oldham, the two very successful further education colleges and the Sixth Form College Science Centre, which is in development. The Council has given strong support to the development of these institutions.

- 93 The Council has worked productively in partnership to support growth in employment and local people's access to jobs. It helped almost 500 local people into jobs during the first six months of 2008, and supported the creation of 1200 jobs in 2007/08. The Passport to Employment project has helped unemployed people to increase their skills and encouraged employers to recruit locally. 75 of the jobs at a new superstore were given to long-term unemployed people and single parents. The Council has worked with voluntary and community organisations to provide employment to 55 people with a learning disability, and assisted 50 people with mental health conditions and 15 disabled people. The Council works with partners to provide support, advice and premises to local employers and the number of businesses in the borough increased between 2005/06 and 2007/08 by more than the partners' target, as did the proportion of local businesses registered for VAT. Since 2006 the Enterprise Factory has supported the start-up of 25 new businesses and assisted 60 businesses to grow.
- 94 The Council and its partners are taking effective action to address the significant challenges that remain for housing in the borough. Too much of the housing stock is in poor condition. The amount of social housing is inadequate, with 12,000 people on waiting lists. With its partners, the Council is addressing the significant mismatch between housing needs and housing supply in the borough, through a vigorous programme of area intervention to improve the local housing market. Housing strategy and implementation are soundly placed in the context of related Council objectives around local places, regeneration and community safety. The Housing Market Renewal programme, in partnership with Rochdale Council, has a strong approach to master planning and raising the quality of new developments and a good understanding of cohesion issues; it is exceeding targets for demolition and returning houses to use. The Council has two major PFI programmes to improve the supply of specific types of housing, one for larger homes (600 houses) and the other for sheltered housing (1500 units).
- 95 The performance of the Council's housing services is improving. Empty properties and repeat homelessness have reduced and almost all of the Council's own housing stock, managed through First Choice Homes, meets the Decent Homes Standard (DHS). Most housing allocations are made through choice-based lettings. Much of the private rented sector does not meet the DHS but the Council has supported the refurbishment of 1231 private sector properties since 2004.
- 96 The Council is actively improving the local environment and the performance of its environmental services. It has an environmental policy which contains a range of ambitions for protecting and improving the local and global environment and reducing the carbon impact of its own operations; an Environmental Management System is supported by 150 eco-champions across the workforce; and a Travel Plan is reducing the number of staff driving to work and the number of business miles. The Council is actively promoting sustainable travel in the borough. However, these plans are not always supported by clear targets and measures, making the measurement of progress difficult.

What has been achieved?

- 97** The links between a good environment and community wellbeing are evident in the Council's approach to the local environment. Parks and local green spaces have been improved explicitly to support quality of life, cohesion and community wellbeing. Seven parks have Green Flag status and make valuable contributions to the quality of their respective neighbourhoods; Alexandra Park is outstanding among these. The Council is taking action to reduce environmental crime through a campaign of enforcement (against, for example, fly tipping). The Council is beginning to introduce neighbourhood agreements to specify more clearly the respective contributions made by local environment and streetcare services and by local residents.
- 98** The performance of the Council's environmental services is improving but from a low base. In 2006/07 performance against almost all environmental performance indicators placed Oldham amongst the worst performing councils. The Council is tackling very low performance in waste management by successfully introducing a new collection regime aimed at achieving considerable improvement in recycling and addressing very low levels of public satisfaction with waste services. The approach is flexible to meet the needs of different households, for example to collect food waste in areas of high housing density where home composting is not feasible. Street cleanliness has improved, reflected in increased satisfaction (from 39 per cent in 2003 to 51 per cent in 2006).
- 99** Extension of Metrolink to Oldham is the centrepiece of the borough's transport strategy and the Council is engaging effectively within Greater Manchester to achieve this. There are funded programmes to improve the low level of maintenance of the local transport infrastructure, including capital investment in road maintenance and a joint PFI scheme for street lighting with Rochdale Council.

Safer and stronger communities

- 100** The Council is working well with partners to tackle crime levels, but the borough remains a high crime area. Partners are implementing a number of effective actions to reduce crime, including alley-gating to reduce burglaries and tackling violent crime in Oldham town centre. While action on alcohol misuse is underdeveloped, partners are achieving some success in the treatment of drug addicts. Effective action is reducing deaths and injuries from fire and road accidents. Emergency planning is adequate. The Council is balancing a long-term approach to cohesion with active support for initiatives to build stronger communities.
- 101** Crime levels are high in Oldham, significantly above the national average. Although crime is falling, Oldham remains a high crime area, with particular challenges around burglary. The Council and its partners have achieved their three year stretch target to reduce crime. In 2007/08 the recorded crime in the borough was down by 25 per cent (British Crime Survey), reducing in all categories except for assault. Burglary fell by over 1,000 incidents (8.8 per cent) in 2007/08, after increasing in 2006/07. Theft of motor vehicles reduced by 48 per cent between 2004 and 2008. Local people's fear of crime reduced in 2007/08, although it is still higher than national average levels.

- 102** The Council is working well with partners to tackle crime levels. It works closely with the police, sharing operational intelligence and operating joint teams. The partners are reducing violent crime in Oldham town centre through a number of projects to improve town centre safety. Street Safe, for example, a response to alcohol-related violence within the evening economy; operates in Oldham town centre on Friday and Saturday evenings and involves a wide range of measures to minimise the incidence of alcohol-related crime and disturbance, for example taxi marshals and stay safe packs. The percentage of people who feel safe during the evening and night in Oldham town centre increased from 52 per cent in 2004 to 64 per cent in 2006.
- 103** The partners' approach to anti-social behaviour (ASB) has produced some positive results but it is not robust. A strategy to tackle ASB has been developed but it does not have a robust action plan. The partners have had some successes in addressing ASB but making a long term sustained impact is proving more difficult. A Witness Support Protocol to encourage residents to report ASB has been set up and there has been further investment in early intervention and prevention services for young people. The Council and its partners share detailed intelligence on the scale and location of ASB and are using this to target effective responses. In the first three months of Operation Owl, aimed at reducing ASB and under-age drinking, 150 youths had alcohol taken from them and incidents of ASB reduced by 32 per cent. Action to reduce the fear of crime and ASB is relatively underdeveloped.
- 104** The approach to reducing the effects of misuse of alcohol is underdeveloped. There is an Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy but it focuses on treatment rather than addressing wider links to community safety. This shortcoming has been recognised and there are plans to set up an independent, multi agency Commission of Enquiry into dealing with alcohol, from community safety, health and regeneration perspectives, in early 2009.
- 105** Through its Drugs and Alcohol Action Team (DAAT), the Council is responding to local needs on drug misuse. For 2006/07 Oldham was just above the average for retaining people on its drugs treatment programmes. The Council and its partners are now shifting their approach from traditional methadone maintenance treatment programmes to abstinence based treatment options. The DAAT has piloted the approach with some success amongst younger drug takers.
- 106** There has been good progress in reducing the numbers of people killed or seriously injured in road traffic collisions. The Council and its partners have set ambitious targets for reducing traffic casualties by 50 per cent by 2010, with a 55 per cent reduction for children killed or seriously injured. Significant reductions in road traffic casualties have already been achieved through the partnership's programme of education work in primary schools, engineering works and joint working on enforcement with other Greater Manchester partnerships. In 2006/07, 98 people were killed or seriously injured, an 11 per cent increase on the previous year; but in 2007/08 this reduced to a total of 77 incidents of people being killed or seriously injured, of whom 19 were children.

What has been achieved?

- 107** The Council and its partners are reducing the risk to residents from fire through home fire risk assessments, installing domestic sprinklers in supported homes, and targeted work with the most vulnerable people. There has been a 35 per cent reduction in accidental dwelling fires since 2004, which is well ahead of the target in the first LAA.
- 108** There are adequate plans for emergency response to major incidents. The Council has identified its business critical services, put in place continuity plans and has mutual aid arrangements with neighbouring Councils. However it has not proactively promoted business continuity planning in the business and voluntary sector, a duty under the Civil Contingencies Act, and is therefore not minimising the impact of any major emergency.
- 109** Community cohesion remains a significant issue in the borough. In 2008 only 52 per cent of residents believe that people from different backgrounds get on well together in their local area. This compares with 54 per cent in the 2006 national indicator survey. This is the fifth lowest percentage in the country. While continuing to monitor community tensions (levels are monitored weekly), the Council and its partners maintain their efforts to improve cohesion. A new community cohesion strategy was agreed in June 2008. It is built on the three pillars of identity, equality and engagement in support of the overarching vision for Oldham as 'A place where everyone is proud to belong'. Although the plan is comprehensive in its scope, the lack of any overt priorities and the absence of targets makes monitoring progress difficult.
- 110** The Council is balancing a long-term approach to cohesion with active support for initiatives to build stronger communities. It is building cohesion and integration into major projects including housing market renewal and Building Schools for the Future. Cultural and sporting events are fostering interactions between communities, for example through the Festival of Diversity. The Council works with many partners, including Oldham Athletic Football Club and many voluntary sports clubs, to increase participation in sport across all communities. The Inter-faith Forum, supported by the Council, has worked hard to improve inter-community understanding and interaction through a range of grass root and Oldham-wide initiatives, for example with schools, the Festival of Light and the Leading to Respect Group.

Healthier communities

- 111** Reducing health inequalities and improving lifestyles are key priorities for the Council and its partners, and effective partnership working is delivering some results. The Council and its partners are targeting their interventions in areas and communities where health inequalities are highest, but the health inequalities gap between Oldham and the rest of England is widening. The Council and the PCT are increasingly delivering services together.

- 112** Reducing health inequalities and improving lifestyles are key priorities for the Council and its partners. A Joint Strategic Needs Assessment has been completed and the development of the Strategic Needs Assessment for Oldham (which will pull together economic, health and other needs into one strategic assessment) has reinforced joint working and the importance of the wellbeing agenda to all partners. The Council, the PCT and other partners are developing effective commissioning arrangements for the future to meet obligations to deliver world class commissioning. Oldham is one of 50 local authorities which is delivering 'Communities for Health', a community-based programme to promote good health and reduce health inequalities. The LAA has a focus on health inequalities and wellbeing and is a positive driving force for health improvement. Some of the indicators offer limited challenges, for example the indicator for alcohol abuse is to reduce the numbers of alcohol-related admissions to accident and emergency services.
- 113** The Council and its partners are targeting their interventions in areas and communities where health inequalities are highest; for example, they are targeting BME women who have a high incidence of mental health problems and helping them to access services. However, they are not addressing specific health inequalities and health issues, for example in mental health and alcohol abuse, in the more affluent and remote parts of the borough.
- 114** The partners are working well together, taking a multi-agency approach to many of the issues that impact on health and wellbeing across the borough. This approach has strong commitments from both the Council and the PCT for finance and resources to support activities. For example, the PCT is meeting the funding shortfall in the Government's free swimming initiative so that the Council can provide free swimming for under 16s and over 60s; and the Council is leading a multi-agency approach to explore the effects of alcohol from the perspectives of health, ASB and enforcement. The Council and the PCT are developing joint initiatives to encourage the use of parks, sports facilities and activities such as walking and cycling, with the Council working to make parks safe for women to use. Almost all (95 per cent) of the borough's schools are participating in the Healthy Schools Programme and 62 per cent of schools have achieved Healthy School status.
- 115** The Council and the PCT are increasingly delivering services together. The Oasis Centre is a co-located Council and PCT drop-in centre for services for young people. Chadderton Health and Wellbeing Centre is the first of a planned series of such centres which bring together primary care, sport, services for young people and older people and wellbeing services. A single access adaptations loan store has increased the quantity of aids and adaptations and the speed with which they are supplied.
- 116** Although the health of people in Oldham is worse than national averages, there are some successful outcomes which indicate improvements in local people's health. Teenage pregnancies reduced by 32.8 per cent between 1998 and 2006, the seventh highest improvement in England; over 17,000 people have stopped smoking through the stop smoking service provided by the PCT; obesity in children under the age of 11 has reduced from 15.9 per cent in 2006/07 to 12.8 per cent in 2007/08.

Older people

- 117** The Council does not have an overarching strategy for services for older people, but it has a number of strands which focus on the needs and aspirations of people over 50 and contribute to improving their quality of life. There is a strong focus on partnership working and an increasing level of consultation with older people. The Council's focus is on health and social care, but there are some examples of a wider range of services. Adult social care services have shown significant improvement.
- 118** At strategic level, there is no overarching strategy for services for older people. An Ageing Population Strategy is planned, linking to the LAA and Citizens' Plan and to strategies for housing, transport, community safety and cohesion as well as to specific care services. Meanwhile, there is an emerging strategic approach to housing and some provision of services for older people outside health and social care. These include lifelong learning courses aimed at older people: in 2007/08 1541 people over the age of 55 joined these classes, which included ICT, health and fitness, and arts and crafts. Satisfaction with parks and open spaces among people over the age of 65 increased from 58 per cent in 2003 to 72 per cent in 2006.
- 119** The Council and its partners are responding well to the housing needs of older people. One of the Council's two housing PFI projects is for the provision of 1500 sheltered homes. The Oldham Partnership and Oldham Housing Partnership have developed the 'Delivering Housing for an Ageing Population 2008-2011' plan to respond to older people's housing needs and to help older people live independently in their own homes by integrating housing, support and social care. It promises consultation including with minority groups. The plan is based on good and detailed analysis of need but is new and does not yet have a robust action plan for its implementation. However, it offers a coherent approach based around choice and independence.
- 120** The Council has provided good support to establishing and maintaining consultation with older people. This is mainly through Forum4Age, an organisation run by older people with Council officer support. Through Forum4Age, there are good examples of the involvement of older people in service design and in consultation on some services. It has lobbied on transport, was involved in the development of the Older People's Housing Strategy, helped with the job description for a specialist leisure worker for older people, and was involved in a joint Council/health appointment. The organisation is relatively small, with 240 members across the borough, but its activities mean that older people are influencing the design of services which help promote their independence.
- 121** The Council is providing good localised support, often in partnership with local organisations, for older people who fall below the social care criteria but need some support, for example on domestic or maintenance work. For this, the Council provides support to small local groups which provide support services. It works closely with local communities through Neighbourhood Access and Prevention Officers (NAPOs), who act as eyes and ears and work in close partnership with other agencies. The Council's aim is to prevent people declining into dependency on social care. It is thus helping older people to remain independent and living in their own homes.

- 122** Where there is a need for social care, there are good and responsive arrangements based on individualised budgets and personal choice. The Council delivers a very wide range of social care services for older people and has improved these services dramatically from one star performance in 2002 to 2004 to three star performance in 2008. Its approach is based on the needs of individuals; it has fully implemented individual budgets for social care. The approach provides for choice; for example, the Link centre provides a range of equipment which is given to individuals based on their personal choice. As well as responding to individual needs, this service is less costly because the Council is not providing equipment which is not used. The Council's approach to the provision of social care is providing personal choice and saving money.
- 123** The Council is improving services that enable an increasing number of older people to live independent lives at home and avoid admission to hospital. In 2007/08 the number of people receiving non-residential intermediate care was over 1000, exceeding the target of 730 people. 14 per cent (160) fewer people lived permanently in a residential or nursing home between June 2006 and December 2007, reflecting more new services and technology.

Children and young people

- 124** Outcomes for children and young people in Oldham are improving and are now generally in line with, or better than, in similar areas. Significant improvements have been made to the quality of social care. Good arrangements are in place to ensure that children in need of protection are identified and supported. Looked after children are well cared for and they live in stable placements. A clear focus on equality and diversity issues ensures the needs of the majority of children and young people are met.
- 125** Service management in Oldham is adequate. The ambition for children and young people is good and shared by all key partners. The relationship of the Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP) to LAA targets is strong and there is a shared responsibility for children and young people. However, resources are not identified fully across all partners and financial plans only cover one year. Progress towards effective Children's Trust arrangements have been slow, although there is a history of partnership arrangements upon which to build. Effective arrangements have been established to support staff, in particular those from black and minority ethnic communities, to progress from national vocational level 2 to qualified social worker. Outcomes against national indicators are well monitored but the impact of provision is insufficiently evaluated.

What has been achieved?

- 126** The combined work of all local services in securing the health of children and young people is good. Partners work well together to promote healthy lifestyles. Services are targeted on the areas of greatest deprivation, with a clear focus on preventative care. A strong emphasis is placed on reducing health inequalities through a range of well-targeted sport and leisure activities. Actions to reduce the rate of teenage pregnancy are effective. In 2006 the teenage pregnancy rate had reduced by 32.8 per cent from the 1998 baseline, which is significantly better than national and similar authorities, and exceeds the 2010 target of 28.3 per cent. Health support, including early intervention and prevention, for looked after children and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is effective.
- 127** Children and young people appear safe and arrangements to ensure this are good. The effective Local Safeguarding Children Board has appropriate representation and is working well. Recruitment practices across the partnership comply with requirements. Duty systems are well resourced and managed. Multi-agency child protection arrangements work well. The fostering service is outstanding and the stability of placements for those looked after is good. Schools and settings where children are cared for provide safe environments. However, progress towards implementation of the Common Assessment Framework has been slow.
- 128** The impact of all local services in helping children and young people to enjoy their education and to achieve well is adequate. In 2006/07 attainment at Key Stages 1 and 3 remained below the averages nationally and for similar authorities. There were improvements at Key Stage 2, where results in mathematics improved to above the average for national and similar authorities. Key Stage 4 results improved at a faster pace than nationally. The percentage of pupils achieving five or more GCSEs A*-C increased in 2006/07, bringing Oldham broadly in line with the national average and above similar authorities. However, the numbers attaining five or more GCSEs A* to C including English and mathematics remained below the average for national and similar authorities. Attainment of looked after children is satisfactory. Through good partnership work, the range of opportunities available to children and young people within and outside school has been considerably extended. Good support is provided to vulnerable children to enable them to enjoy and achieve. No schools are currently in an Ofsted category of concern.
- 129** The impact of all local services in helping children and young people to contribute to society is good. There is a strong strategic commitment to young people's participation and to listening to young people's views. Young people contribute to staff recruitment and there are good examples of services developing in response to their views. Children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and looked after children are provided with good support to participate in the Youth Council. Much effort is made to ensure those receiving services take part in reviews. The council takes its corporate parenting responsibilities seriously, and high quality services for children and young people who are looked after are championed effectively by members. Although first time offending is reducing well, re-offending rates remain higher than in similar areas.

- 130** The impact of all local services in helping children and young people achieve economic well-being is good. Effective partnership working across Connexions, schools and providers has resulted in good outcomes in terms of the numbers of 16 to 18 year olds, including care leavers aged 16-18, involved in education, employment and training. The number of young people aged 16 to 18 with learning difficulties and/or disabilities who are not in education, employment or training has reduced but remains higher than nationally. Intervention projects with those at risk of disengagement with education and the expansion of 14 to 19 vocational opportunities, together with apprenticeship programmes, make a further significant contribution in this area. Provision for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities aged 16 to 19 is good. More young people aged 16 are remaining in education compared to national and similar authorities. The percentage of young people gaining level 2 and 3 qualifications by the age of 19 is above the national average.
- 131** The capacity of Council services to improve is adequate. The Council and its partners are addressing long-standing weaknesses in educational attainment and services for vulnerable young people well. There is much evidence of action taken leading to improvement, for example, in social care performance indicators, 5 A*-C results for looked after children and 14 to 19 educational outcomes. However, the changes are recent and there is insufficient evidence of continuous and sustained improvement. Value for money is adequate, however neither the council nor the Changing for Children Board undertake any robust or systematic analysis of value for money. There is a lack of a sufficiently robust relationship between strategic planning, financial medium term planning and performance management.

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 Oldham Metropolitan 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.

The Audit Commission

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