

Comprehensive Performance Assessment

Wellingborough Borough Council

February 2009



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Introduction

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

Executive summary

- 3 The Borough Council of Wellingborough has deteriorated since its last corporate assessment in 2004 when it was categorised as 'excellent' and is now categorised as 'weak'. There is a lack of robust ambition in the Council which combined with a lack of strategic, co-ordinated leadership by both officers and members means the Council is not driving forward improvement for local people.
- 4 While there is now more focus to what it is trying to do, the Council has not yet developed its organisation around the delivery of its priorities. The Council can point to few significant achievements in recent years. The rate of improvement has been comparatively weak over the last three years. The current performance indicator position is now just below average in comparison to others. There is recognition by officers of what needs to be done to transform the organisation, but there has been little progress.
- 5 The Council is not providing strategic leadership in the borough. Ambitions for the area have been developed by the borough's Local Strategic Partnership, in which the Council plays a supportive rather than a leading role. There is little high-level engagement with partners, including representatives of black and minority ethnic (BME) groups, in developing a shared vision for the area, particularly by members. The Council's focus has been insular, at a local, ward level. While an understanding of locality level issues is important, the Council is not using this knowledge, with the range of partner data available, to produce a joint understanding of borough-wide needs and challenges. Consequently the Council is focusing on addressing ward-level issues rather than leading on shaping the future of the area.
- 6 There is a clear recognition in the Council, at officer level, of what it needs to do to improve, but there has been slow progress. Through successive annual planning events, officers have highlighted the need for stronger community leadership by the Council, and the recently developed PRIDE priorities reflect more closely the key challenges in the borough. There was a lack of engagement with partners in the development of PRIDE, with no consultation on the proposed priorities, but they do provide more focus on what the organisation is trying to achieve. Similarly, the Business Transformation Programme and the improvements to the way the Council manages performance indicate some awareness of what the organisation needs to do to improve. However, progress has been slow and therefore the impact has been limited. Improvements within the organisation have not been driven forward by officers, with a lack of political support further constraining the pace of change.

Executive summary

- 7 The Council's approach to developing its capacity to deliver its priorities has been piecemeal. Without a robust vision of what the organisation is trying to achieve, the Council has had no clear focus to how it should organise itself. Consequently, although there have been initiatives such as 'Fit for Change' there has been no consistent approach to workforce planning. The Council is keen to work in partnership and has established some shared services arrangements, although some partners point to the absence of clear objectives for the arrangements. The latest officer restructure does provide clearer alignment to the Council's objectives and the revised scrutiny arrangements give separate focus to internal and external performance. However, the level of challenge offered by these committees is limited.
- 8 Financial capacity is sufficient but steadily reducing, and there is no plan for addressing this beyond the current medium term plan, other than to reduce expenditure from an already low base. Low expenditure is reflected in low council tax levels, though this is confused with good value for money. External auditors assess the Council's approach to the way it uses resources as declining, with the assessment of value for money also declining. Low expenditure with average and declining services does not represent good value for money.
- 9 Performance management has not been effective, with a comparative decline in performance being the result. Although performance indicators are reported, the Council has not, until recently, organised itself to drive up performance. Performance has been reported but not challenged and local measurements against the Council's objectives have not been developed. There is limited management of performance in partnerships. There are few examples of benchmarking performance against others or of corporate analysis of feedback or complaints data. The organisation has not effectively monitored performance, and has failed corporately to effectively manage performance. There are services where performance has improved, suggesting effective arrangements at a service level in some areas.
- 10 The Council has not performed consistently well against its objectives. There has been progress against some environmental objectives, notably improved recycling rates. The Council has built a new leisure centre in the town centre, replacing the Croyland Road Swimming Pool, contributing to the objective to provide a high quality leisure and cultural service offer. However, in terms of the main issues identified as important in the area, namely achieving the growth to develop the town and the town centre, and addressing the largely negative community safety statistics, there have been few tangible achievements. Performance data shows that comparative service quality has weakened. Given that 'responsive, affordable and efficient services' has been one of the Council's objectives, performance indicator trends suggest that this has not been achieved. Performance against other priorities has been inconsistent. Although affected by external circumstances, there have been limited outcomes against the objective to manage the growth agenda in the area, which is critical to the sustainability of the local economy.

Areas for improvement

- 11 Leadership of the Council needs to improve. There needs to be more leadership by elected members of the strategic partnership working in the borough so that the Council is using its knowledge and overview of needs in the borough to influence the work of key strategic partners. Elected members need to provide more direction to growth in the area, helping to shape the area rather than be subject to others' decisions.
- 12 Officer leadership needs to be stronger to deliver change and manage improvement more effectively. Senior management needs to focus more on the strategic development of the organisation and the role and profile of the Council with partners, both within and outside the borough.
- 13 Performance management needs to be sharper with more challenge and accountability. The Council needs to be clear, with partners, what the key and emerging challenges in the borough are, considering local, regional and national factors. Performance should be managed in this context and linked with the work and objectives of strategic partners. There needs to be a robust cascade into strategy development and then into integrated service and financial planning. Members need to be given clear information about performance enabling them to challenge more effectively and the organisation needs to be sharper in identifying and tackling underperformance. Benchmarking against high performers needs to be routine.
- 14 The Council knows it needs to transform itself to deliver better, more responsive services. The Business Transformation Programme contains the key improvement elements but the connections among the many projects are not clearly articulated. In order to manage this Programme effectively, and ensure the benefits from it are maximised, the Council needs to prioritise the projects, and establish a clear and rational sequence of delivery, which allows breakthroughs in one area to act as the catalyst for faster and more profound progress in others.
- 15 The Council needs to improve engagement at all levels. Except for specific neighbourhood renewal partnerships, the pattern of engagement with partners, contractors, stakeholders and diverse communities is not consistent. An action plan is needed to remedy current failings, and transform the Council from a passive and largely undemanding partner to an organisation that actively uses engagement to first understand the needs of the borough, and then act upon those needs. This plan must increase the focus on the needs of diverse communities in the borough, particularly BME groups, so that the knowledge and understanding of these groups is reflected in Council and partnership policy.

Summary of assessment scores

Headline questions	Theme	Score*	Weighted score
What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?	Ambition	2	4
	Prioritisation	2	4
What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?	Capacity	1	2
	Performance management	1	2
What has been achieved?	Achievement and Improvement	2	14
Weighted score			26
CPA category			Weak
*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

- 16 The Borough of Wellingborough is one of seven districts in the East Midlands county of Northamptonshire. The borough spans an area of 163 square miles and has a population of 75,500. Of these people, approximately two thirds live in the town of Wellingborough. The remainder live in 19 surrounding villages and smaller settlements. The County town of Northampton is nine miles to the west and close by is Kettering with Milton Keynes further afield.
- 17 Compared to similar districts, the population of Wellingborough is quite ethnically diverse. Across the borough, 7 per cent of the population is from an ethnic minority group. This rises to 11 per cent in the town itself. The main groups are Indian, African-Caribbean and more recently, Eastern Europeans.
- 18 The area is close to national averages in terms of population structure, housing, health and crime but this conceals some real differences in levels of deprivation at ward level. Parts of the town and several of the surrounding villages are relatively affluent. However, there are pockets of deprivation. Three wards have areas that are in the top 10 per cent nationally for deprivation affecting children. Taking wards as a whole, six of the 14 are among the top 40 per cent most income deprived areas in England. Conversely, five wards are among the least income-deprived fifth of areas. The level of statutorily homeless households has fluctuated around the average in recent years.
- 19 Wellingborough was once home to various industries including textiles and iron founding. With the decline of these industries, most of the town's residents are now employed in light manufacturing, distribution or in retail. Unemployment levels are slightly below the national average. 83.6 per cent of the population of working age is economically active compared to a national average of 78.5 per cent (ONS data) However, the borough has substantially less people employed in managerial and professional occupations than the national average (28.7 per cent against 42.5 per cent) and conversely higher proportions employed in 'low-wage' professions. Around 30 per cent of employees who live in Wellingborough work in Northampton, while 20 per cent of those who work in the borough live outside the district. Just 10 per cent of working persons who reside in Wellingborough work outside Northamptonshire.
- 20 There are four mixed comprehensive foundation secondary schools in the borough and a well respected independent day school. GCSE attainment is substantially lower than the English average. 49.8 per cent of pupils achieved five or more A* – C grades in 2005/06 compared to the average of 57.5 per cent. Relatively few pupils from Wellingborough schools go on to university. However, increasing numbers are now obtaining NVQ qualifications.

Context

- 21 The overall health of the local community is similar to the English and East Midlands averages. A detailed assessment of this was carried out by the County Council through the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment. The borough performs substantially better than the national average in terms of female life expectancy, the number of adults who binge drink and the number of people who feel in poor health or who suffer mental health problems. The number of hospital stays due to alcohol and the rate of child tooth decay are also significantly better than average. However, figures for the teenage pregnancy rate and the number of obese adults are significantly above average, as is the number of people killed or injured on local roads.
- 22 The rate of violent crime in the borough is lower than the English average while non-violent crimes such as theft of a motor vehicle and burglary of dwellings are well above average. Anti-social behaviour is perceived to be more of a problem in Wellingborough than across Northamptonshire as a whole. A recent survey found that 49 per cent of residents felt that action was needed to reduce the local level of crime. The same survey found that just 16 per cent of respondents felt safe when outside alone after dark in Wellingborough.
- 23 The borough is within the Milton Keynes/South Midlands (MK/SM) Growth Area. Joint work on planning is enabled through the North Northamptonshire Joint Planning Unit. The North Northamptonshire Development Company coordinates delivery and implementation. Local people have participated in a programme of continuous consultation on the redevelopment of the town centre and have made clear their desire to regenerate and revitalise the area, while preserving the benefits of its heritage. The proposed growth will see Wellingborough town expand by 30 per cent over the next ten to 15 years. A total of 12,800 dwellings are due to be built in the borough of Wellingborough by 2021. Of these, 11,590 are due to be built in Wellingborough town, with 1,210 in the surrounding villages. Four thousand, three hundred and fifty homes are planned for an area east of the town. The largest of the developments to the East of the town is Stanton Cross, comprising 3,200 homes, the creation of 9,000 jobs and the provision of a range of infrastructure. A further 3,000 homes are likely to be built to the north of the town.

The Council

- 24 The Council is comprised of 36 Councillors. The whole Council is elected every four years. The current composition is 30 Conservative, 4 Labour and 2 Independent.
- 25 As the population of the borough is less than 85,000, the Council has chosen Alternative Arrangements, namely committees with a Scrutiny function. All parties in the Council are committed to this approach.
- 26 The Council currently employs 250 full-time staff and 86 part-time (300 full-time equivalents). Around one third of employees are aged over 50.

- 27 The transfers of housing and leisure services to other providers have resulted in a review of the residual functions of the Council. From June 2008 the main decision-making policy committees are Community, Development and Resources. A Community Committee focuses on the Council services that contribute to today's quality of life while a new Development Committee will oversee the spatial and infrastructure growth for the future. The Council has recently revised its scrutiny function, creating an Audit and Performance Committee which focuses primarily on internal issues, and a Partnerships Reviews Committee with an external focus.
- 28 The Council's mission statement is 'Making Wellingborough a Place to be Proud of' and is expressing this through its priorities mnemonic PRIDE.
- Promoting high quality growth.
 - Reducing crime and anti-social behaviour.
 - Improving life chances for young people.
 - Delivering efficient and responsive services.
 - Enhancing the environment.
- 29 The Council's PRIDE priorities represent a mixture of continuity and change. The Council's ambitions have, for several years, centred on a commitment to maintain and improve local quality of life around the themes of:
- managing allocated spatial growth to benefit the local area;
 - providing a high quality leisure and cultural service offer;
 - promoting and protecting the local environment;
 - providing responsive, affordable and efficient statutory and non-statutory services to local people; and
 - generating revenues from property investments, which also provide economic vitality.
- 30 The Council's revenue budget for 2008/09 is £11,489,800. This is an increase of £1,035,200 over the 2007/08 base budget and would require around £1,650,000 from reserves to keep the council tax increase below 5 per cent. The proposed council tax rate at band 'D' is £144.54 which is the lowest rate in Northamptonshire.
- 31 In 2004 the Council was assessed as 'excellent' in its Comprehensive Performance Assessment. Subsequent concerns regarding the Council's direction of travel in recent years prompted a submission for the Council to be re-assessed to establish whether the original assessment remained current.

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

Ambition

- 32** The Council is performing adequately in this area. There are ambitions for the area set out in the Community Plan and there are links between those ambitions and the focus of the Council's work. However, the Council has not demonstrated strategic community leadership in the development of the ambitions, contributing little to setting the agenda for the area. The Local Strategic Partnership has been instrumental in developing the vision for the area while the Council is yet to translate that into an over-arching strategy. There is limited evidence of the Council and its partners pooling their knowledge to produce a shared and jointly owned assessment of the needs and challenges in the borough and there has been a lack of leadership from the Council in ensuring effective partnership working at a strategic level.
- 33** There are clear ambitions for the area which reflect its main challenges. The Wellingborough Community Plan, produced in 2006 reflects the key challenges facing the borough. The plan identifies the key demographic changes taking place in the borough and recognises challenges to providers. The Plan's themes are community cohesion, neighbourhood renewal, sustainable growth and the town centre and there are themed task groups responsible for the delivery of the plans targets. This basis for the plan ensures the subsequent action plans and strategies relate to the key emerging issues in the borough.
- 34** The Council's objectives link to the Community Plan and have a basis in the strategic challenges in the borough. Through its Annual Policy Seminars the Council considers the focus of the Community Plan and the priorities of the Local Area Agreement and county-wide strategies. The Council has also adapted its ambitions to reflect the concerns of residents. The increased focus on crime, anti-social behaviour and young people reflects the main concerns raised in the 2006 residents survey. This ensures the Council's policy objectives are consistent with those of its local strategic partners as well as county-wide strategic planning.
- 35** The Council has failed to provide effective leadership in developing the strategic vision for the area. The Council's role has been one of supporting rather than leading. The Council does not chair the local strategic partnership and there is a lack of leadership by the Council, particularly from elected members. The Council has not been proactive in producing a collaborative assessment of needs and has not promoted a shared understanding of challenges among the partners. As a consequence, the strategic partnership has produced ambitions for the borough over which the Council has had limited influence.

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

- 36** The Council has no over-arching strategy shaping how it will contribute to the strategic objectives for Wellingborough. The Council has not produced a corporate analysis of need in the borough. Councillors have focused predominantly on developing a growing understanding of ward-level issues through ward surveys and ward walks. While it is important to understand locality issues and problems, the Council has not translated the wider demographic or statutory changes into its strategic planning framework. Without this, service development will only be informed by locality issues and not by an assessment of the wider strategic context in which the Council operates.
- 37** The Council's approach to developing corporate policy has been largely insular. While there is recognition of the environment and context in which the Council operates, there has been little involvement of strategic partners and stakeholders in producing the plans to guide strategy development. There is local consultation and ward level knowledge has informed ambitions but it has not been consistently integrated with the plans of other deliverers. As a consequence, there is differing understanding among partners of what the Council is trying to achieve with little alignment of plans.
- 38** There has been limited impact of engagement with black and minority ethnic (BME) groups and others at risk of disadvantage regarding the development of Council policy. There is liaison with BME communities through the BME Forum and the Wellingborough Black Consortium. However, there is no evidence that this contact has been used to inform Council policy, with the result that the wider needs of these communities are not fully understood or incorporated when developing the vision for the area. This means that plans and future action by the Council may not reflect the needs of Wellingborough's diverse and potentially disadvantaged communities.
- 39** Officers have provided appropriate advice to improve the Council's approach to strategic planning and leadership. Successive Annual Policy Seminars have highlighted the need for stronger community leadership, with clear guidance to members to take a proactive role in shaping Wellingborough's future or risk 'being an unwilling part in someone else's solution'. The need to have a 'strong shared vision' has also been advised by officers. The Council has a process underway for developing a strategic vision which builds on these points and takes account of the new Local Area Agreement, the new Sustainable Community Strategy and the new community plan. These do provide a logical platform for strategy development. Recent member involvement in LSP task groups and the Steering Group indicate a different approach from the Council. There is recognition of what needs to be done at officer level but members need to heed the advice, be more involved in developing plans for Wellingborough's future, and need to be shaping the place that Wellingborough will be.

Prioritisation

- 40** The Council is performing adequately in this area. The Council has had reasonably consistent objectives over a period of time and has reviewed the focus of these through the PRIDE priorities established earlier this year. Although there was limited partner involvement in developing PRIDE, there are connections between Council priorities and wider objectives. There are basic but evident links between priorities, service planning and financial planning. Priorities lack clear outcomes and targets although there are some robust strategies stating how priorities will be delivered.

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

- 41 The Council's objectives have provided broadly consistent direction over several years. These objectives link in to the Community Plan and reflect the local context. The themes around spatial growth, the environment and the provision of efficient and affordable services have featured in several annual Business Plans. The Council has been clear over a period of time about issues which are more important than others resulting in consistent focus of resources and services in these areas.
- 42 The Council has developed clearer priorities. The five priorities which sit beneath the PRIDE mnemonic are a refinement of previous objectives. Following ward surveys and the election in 2007, the Council produced these priorities which give clearer focus and direction to service planning. They reflect more closely the emerging challenges and concerns across the borough, particularly about fears around anti-social behaviour and widespread recognition that more needed to be done for young people. They also provide clarity about the Council's objectives for growth. This clarity gives sharper focus to future strategic planning and direction.
- 43 Partners had limited input to the development of the Council's priorities. The priorities were produced largely internally and partners were not consulted on PRIDE for example until it emerged earlier this year. The Council has reflected partner's perspectives through reference to the existing policy base of the Community Plan but have not actively sought external input. The consequences of this are a lack of engagement by partners in the Council's agenda and a risk the Council's priorities do not reflect the emergent thinking of partners and do not benefit from the efficiencies of joint focus and delivery.
- 44 Priorities are not based on a robust assessment of need. While they represent an evolution of previous policy objectives, and do reflect needs and concerns expressed at a ward level, there was not a fundamental review of challenges across the borough. There was no comprehensive consultation programme with partners to understand their expectations and requirements. The business sector, critical to the objectives around growth and the town centre, maintain their needs are not understood. There is no coordinated assessment of the needs of the borough's ethnically diverse communities. Without this basis, the Council may not be focussing its resources in the key challenges facing the borough.
- 45 The quality of strategies in place to manage the delivery of priorities is varied. The Community Safety Strategy contains some outward facing targets for crime reduction and the plans in place to underpin the development of the town centre demonstrate commitment to the 'growth' priority. By contrast, the Anti-Social Behaviour policy does not contain actions or plans for how anti-social behaviour will be tackled. As a result, allocating resources to these areas and managing progress towards outcomes will be inconsistent.
- 46 Priorities have limited focus on outcomes. Previous policy objectives have lacked clear outcomes for what the Council is trying to do and what success will look like. Even the PRIDE priorities, while they have 'outcomes' which members selected, do not have clear targets for achievement which residents would recognise. Without these, priorities will not define what services are trying to achieve.

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

- 47 There are adequate links between the Council's priorities and service planning and financial planning. The priorities agreed at the Annual Policy seminar subsequently inform service planning. These service plans produce service bids for funding which are considered by the estimates working group in the autumn each year. This group assesses bids and informs the production of the budget accordingly. The impact on the budget is not significant as it does not start from a 'zero base' but the criteria used to assess growth bids are based on the priorities for that year. The Council has identified non-priorities which are subject to a 'basic level of support'. Examples of non-priorities are twinning, tourism and services for older people but the resourcing impact of these is limited. Through this process, service delivery plans and financial allocations consider the policy direction.
- 48 There is limited evidence of the Council's priorities driving delivery and decision-making. Despite the links between policies and financial planning, the changes and shift of resources towards priorities is marginal. Services essentially deliver in their respective arenas and have limited focus on the cross-cutting themes of the priorities. There are few examples of difficult decisions being resolved through reference to the Council's priorities.

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

Capacity

- 49 The Council performance in this area is weak. Weaknesses in strategic political leadership and managerial leadership mean that the Council's capacity to achieve change and deliver continuous improvement is significantly compromised. Although there are structures in place around financial management, shared services, procurement and asset management poor leadership has inhibited impact. The Council has put in place some of the basic building blocks for organisational development and improvement, but the lack of senior political support for change and development means that the pace of change has been slow. Despite recognising the need and the focus for change, managers have been unable to make progress at a rate which enhances the Council's ability to deliver improvement. To date, the Council has not had sufficient capacity to sustain performance improvement.
- 50 Leadership at the Council at political and managerial level is weak. The political leadership has focused on localised problems. Partners are unclear about Council commitment to the bigger challenges of the growth agenda. At senior officer level, weak leadership has shown itself in slow progress in resolving outstanding deficiencies in customer access, capacity building and performance management. There are some achievements in leadership at the Council, such as the proposed redevelopment of the town centre and the largely successful stock housing transfer. But these do not alter the general pattern and perception outside the Council that it is reactive and slow moving.
- 51 Decision making procedures have recently been restructured to improve their effectiveness but they are not delivering significant continuous improvement. Recent restructuring of the Scrutiny Committee, dividing it in two to enable a sharper internal and external focus, has had little impact to date. Relations between councillors and officers are professional, but distant, with too much day-to-day business being channelled through the Chief Executive. This pattern is beginning to change with the new Town Centre Action Plan and the developing systems of ward surveys. But overall the decision making processes are not driving the Council forward effectively.

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

- 52** Financial management processes are sound but the capacity to support future delivery is declining. The Council is strongly committed to delivering low levels of Council Tax and has achieved this consistently. This is supported by a clear commitment to achieving value for money, evidenced by the new Improvement and Efficiency Strategy and the introduction of a VFM toolkit for services. However, the Council does not currently have an effective framework in place to deliver and manage the cost and performance of services and determine value for money. Recent investments in capacity to address growth agenda challenges, and to arrest the relative decline in performance have increased the pressure on Council reserves. There are no prospects of an imminent financial crisis but the decline in reserves is projected to continue for the life of the current Medium Term Financial strategy until 2010/11. Throughout the term of the financial plan, the Council is seeking to increase the income raised through Council tax and reduce expenditure. This means financial capacity is reducing.
- 53** The approach to organisational development has been piecemeal, without a clear overall picture about current and future needs. The Council has invested in capacity, dating from 2005 when the 'Fit for Change' initiative was launched. This sought to improve skills across the organisation in three core areas: communications, performance and change management. Since then, £220,000 of Planning Delivery grant has been ploughed back into the planning service, resulting in improved online public access and enhanced contributions to the joint planning work with other councils in North Northamptonshire. There have been similar new investments in the housing service, to support homelessness and victim support strategies. Weaknesses in the management capacity have been improved by recent restructuring, with 26 service heads reduced to eight new Heads of Service, who will make up the new Operational Management Team (OMT). However, the investment has been responsive rather than strategic. This lack of a strategic approach to anticipating and addressing workforce development has meant the approach has not had the impact and benefit it should have.
- 54** The Council Human Resources (HR) function provides a fair service but with limited impacts, and is now in the process of being modernised. Sometimes, as in the recent work on retention and recruitment in the planning service, the Council's traditional approach to personnel management can be very effective. Updated member training programmes are being implemented, beginning with the leadership and Committee chairs, and 22 out of 36 councillors now have Personal Development Plans, with full coverage the aim. The Council also has corporate Investors in People (IiP) accreditation, and staff development programmes are in place. Problems with long-standing staff sickness are gradually being resolved. Limitations of the existing approach to HR are recognised. New HR processes are in the planning stage, as part of the organisational development projects of the BTP. The overall effectiveness of existing systems and processes as a means of building capacity for improvement is thus limited.

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

- 55 The Council is not securing the full benefits from partnership arrangements. It has shared arrangements for legal services, for IT and internal audit and has successfully externalised the management of both leisure services and housing. In IT, the partnership with East Northants District Council offers the prospect of updating increasingly obsolescent systems and processes and the Council has committed funds for a five-year rolling improvement programme. But the approach to this partnership, as with others, is passive and lacks a strategic plan. The relationship with partners is more that of a client/contractor arrangement, where partners are expected to deliver in a quasi-contractual relationship. This fails to harness the full benefit to the Council of partnering where there is an opportunity for joint working, ongoing dialogue and responsive to improving the service.
- 56 The Council has effective procurement and asset management processes, but does not secure consistent wider benefits from these. The Council is updating its traditional procurement strategy, to give more emphasis to sustainability, to strengthening the local supply chain, and to the equalities agenda. Asset management, too, is being overhauled as part of the BTP. There are investments on both counts, with the Council actively committed to reducing significantly its carbon footprint, and with notable renovations of assets linked to Town Centre regeneration. Although improvements are planned the potential benefits from strategic procurement and asset management are not being realised.

Performance management

- 57 The Council's performance in this area is weak. Performance management processes are not driving continuous improvement in outcomes. The performance culture is not strong. Finance and performance reporting systems are not integrated. Benchmarking of costs and performance is not routinely applied. Customer feedback and satisfaction data is not systematically collated or analysed, to drive future service improvement. There is an annual cycle for performance and resource planning and Councillor-led targeting of underperformance has led to some improved outcomes. Performance management in partnership is under developed although action is now being taken to improve this. There have been recent investments and restructuring, with a new head of performance and the adoption of an improvement action plan, but the weak approach to managing performance in recent years has resulted in a weakening of the Council's comparative position when compared nationally.

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

- 58 The Council has not been consistently effective in making the corporate shift from the monitoring of performance to its management. The format for reporting to the Council and committees is not conducive to constructive challenge about performance, or the targeting of remedial action. Reports lack comparative cost, performance and trend data. There is not a clear track record of productive challenge on under-performing performance indicators (PIs). Most of the recent successful interventions, such as on sickness absence rates, have come about because of the leadership working through the Chief Executive. And the absence, until recently, of a dedicated corporate performance manager is an indication that performance issues have not been given due priority corporately. As a result, Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs) improvement has been among the weakest in the country over the past three years. Improvement for 2007/08 compared the previous year is about average. The percentage of PIs in the top quartile is now just below average. Services for local people have failed to improve at the rate of most other councils and the comparative quality of some services has declined.
- 59 The performance culture at the Council is not rigorous or robust. Declining relative performance over the past three years may have prompted the Council to seek external advice and assistance. But this significant decline has created no great sense of urgency within the Council, with movement towards a more effective process moving ahead only slowly. Best Value Performance Indicators are given priority, with little time given over to the design, review or improvement of such local PIs that exist. There is no sense of ownership of performance indicators among members, and little among staff. Performance is not monitored against corporate objectives. Improvements are planned but there is no clear evidence the culture has shifted to a performance driven organisation. As a result, the Council's rate of improvement over the last three years is poor in comparison to others.
- 60 The Council arrangements for monitoring and reporting performance are adequate. Standard procedures for a performance management process are in place. Performance information is collated monthly and a report on key indicators is submitted to the full Council ten times a year. Quarterly monitoring reports go to the Resources Committee as part of an outturn report which includes spending figures. The former Scrutiny Committee has been divided, with the new Audit and Performance Committee established with a clear focus on the Council's performance. A new head of performance has recently been appointed. These processes have produced some successes, for example in actively managing the performance of the housing service upwards to meet successfully the challenge of rising local homelessness, but generally they have failed to drive up performance levels.

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

- 61 Performance information is not routinely integrated with either financial or customer feedback information, thereby weakening the focus of Council activity. Performance and financial information are submitted as parts of the quarterly outturn package that goes to the Resources Committee. However, they are submitted as individual components rather than fully integrated, and there is also an absence of any accompanying comparative or service user data. This makes it very difficult for committee members to either make robust judgements about where to allocate resources to address under-performance, or to sustain a clear user focus. Work is in hand to create a more integrated cost/performance approach, using a new template for a scorecard and using the flexibility offered by the new financial management System. None of that is operational yet with the consequence that there is not a clear focus on the links between performance and expenditure.
- 62 The Council processes for service feedback have only a short term, operational focus. The Council Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system dates from 2001, and there is £300,000 in the budget to procure a much-needed successor. Customer feedback is fed directly back to services, and their responses are monitored, but the system does not work to the satisfaction of either internal or external customers. The focus is operational, not strategic, and there is no concerted process to capture this information corporately and analyse it to study trends in feedback on Council services. The Council is missing the opportunity to improve services by learning from the analysis of complaints and feedback.
- 63 Arrangements for staff input to service design are adequate and improving. Channels for staff input into performance and service design have greatly improved from a low base through high levels of participation in the 'Fit for Change' process. The staff suggestion scheme, which routinely submits ideas for consideration by the Operational Management Team, continuously delivers fresh thinking on problems of performance and delivery across the Council. This does allow staff understanding of delivery issues to inform improvement.
- 64 The Council is open to external review and is now acting on advice received. Having been previously rated as 'excellent', the Council has not been the focus for sustained improvement work by external partners over the past four years. Nonetheless, in the past two years, as it has become increasingly clear the Council's performance management processes were not working effectively, the Council has sought external advice and support. Work by the Planning Advisory Service, the Benefits Fraud Inspectorate and latterly an efficiency peer review by the IDeA have all contributed to service specific improvements, such as in planning and revenue and benefits, and a corporate performance management action plan, which is just beginning to be implemented. As a result, the assessments of external agencies are beginning to be implemented.

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

- 65 Performance management in partnerships is generally weak though there are signs of improvement. Performance management of partnerships has not been a high priority for the Council. The chair of the LSP does not routinely report on performance to the Council and the Council has made little input into arrangements to manage performance in the LSP. Commercial partnerships and shared services do not benefit from well considered qualitative targeting. There are, however, signs of improvement in some areas. The Crime Reduction and Disorder Partnership is fast developing its own database to ensure that future performance management is more intelligence led. Similarly, the Council is leading enhanced partnership work aimed at neighbourhood renewal in wards across the borough, and especially those with relatively high levels of multiple deprivation. This work uses a growing understanding of local concerns, much of it derived from ward walks led by councillors, to drive improvement work, with significant achievements already in Queensway and Brickhill. The lack of effective management of partnership performance means the resources invested in partnership projects may not be delivering effectively.

What has been achieved?

Achievement and improvement

- 66** The Council performance in this area is adequate, achieving reasonable quality in most services and priority areas. Despite some good cross-cutting outcomes that are benefiting local people, overall achievements in partnership are few. The rate of improvement is weak, and the Council has slipped below the average top quartile performance of councils nationally. Building blocks are being put in place for future achievement in some areas of priority need, particularly in relation to the growth agenda and town centre regeneration. But the Council is not consistently contributing to improved achievement of outcomes of partners, or partnerships.
- 67** Council services are performing adequately. Thirty one per cent of the Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs) are in the best performing category (best quartile), just below the all council average of 33 per cent. In the past three years, 47 per cent of all comparable BVPIs have improved. This is significantly below the all council average of between 54 and 56 per cent and amongst the worst nationally. These indicators suggest that absolute performance levels are average.
- 68** The feedback from residents demonstrates variable levels of satisfaction. The MORI survey carried out in autumn 2006 found that 53 per cent were satisfied with the Council, which is in line with national averages and above average across the county. Against that, there are heightened resident concerns about crime, cleanliness and waste/recycling and the proportion of residents who believe that service delivery had improved in the past three years was among the lowest in the country.

Managing spatial growth

- 69** There has been little progress towards meeting the enhanced targets for the MK/SM corridor. The MK/SM target is 142,000 new homes by 2026, with the Wellingborough share of this being 12,800. There has been slow progress on the Wellingborough East (WEast) development. The delays have been due to circumstances beyond the Council's control, with competing views on priorities for principal road access from rival developers effectively blocking development. Recently the Council has brokered talks between the rival developers which have resulted in an agreement. The lack of progress, and the current financial climate, does jeopardise the wider plans for sustainable growth.

- 70** Progress on growth and affordable housing targets in the Core Spatial Strategy (CSS) has been steady and generally good. The target for affordable housing has recently been increased to 30 per cent. Building blocks for future growth and prosperity have been put in place though the pace of development has been slow. The number of new houses built stands at 1,952 against a cumulative CSS target of just over 2,000, and affordable housing is being delivered at the previous local target rate of around 27 per cent of that figure, ensuring housing supply for potentially disadvantaged groups.
- 71** The Council has made slow and generally ineffectual progress in making the town more attractive to existing and potential business investors. Work is being done with the Northamptonshire Enterprise Limited and with the Town Centre Partnership to better market the town for inward commercial investment, with a new eye-catching brochure on the town's comparative advantages. The new Town Centre Action plan is a major building block in the commercial and social renewal of what is a comparatively run-down town centre. But these are highlights in an otherwise weak performance. Use of Council assets in town has not been strategic. The Council has not consistently protected the interests of local businesses through enforcement action against rogue trading. All this has fed local business perceptions that the Council is not acting on their behalf, or taking due account of their interests and concerns.
- 72** Progress with partners on developing the local economy has been limited. Though local unemployment rates are below the national average, skill and wage rates are well below average, with continued high reliance on manufacturing and assembly. New VAT registrations are below average and de-registrations above average. Educational attainment is below the national average and there are pockets of high unemployment across the borough. The Council has taken some action, for example by investing in commercial property and attracting external funding. Provision of existing industrial facilities is not good, with some adverse feedback on customer care and maintenance from users. Without a stronger and more diverse local economy, local people will have restricted employment opportunities.

High quality leisure and cultural offer

- 73** The Council leisure facilities have been improved by a combination of outsourcing and new build, but the impact of this on residents, particularly those at risk of disadvantage, has not been significant. The Council leisure operations and theatre are both outsourced on a contractual basis. With the opening of the new Waendel Leisure Centre in the town centre, usage has doubled, with more teaching and health related programmes than was previously possible. The Castle Theatre has seen production numbers rise from 240 per year to well over 400. Leisure and cultural provision has increased.
- 74** Weak client management of both operations has diminished the potential impact on the quality of life for local residents, and particularly those at risk of disadvantage. By failing to specify contractually qualitative as opposed to quantitative measures, such as the need to actively promote access in deprived wards or for vulnerable young people by concessionary schemes, an opportunity to target potentially disadvantaged groups, and then track impact, has been missed. As a result, the facilities may not be benefiting target groups within the community.

What has been achieved?

Promote and protect the environment

- 75** Performance on waste and recycling has improved and is now above the national average. All households are now covered by kerbside recycling. The introduction of alternate weekly collection in 2005 has been successful in raising the combined recycling rate to 34 per cent in 2007/08, with further incremental improvement indicated by early, non-audited returns for 2008/09. Pilot work is now underway on kitchen caddies for the recycling of food waste. Costs of waste and recycling have been kept relatively low through effective procurement of vehicles and maintenance, and there is some small-scale work with the local voluntary sector to recycle large items of household furniture. But satisfaction with the service remains inconsistent, with a big decline in satisfaction following the introduction of alternate weekly collection, and public concern at this remains relatively strong. Through improved recycling, the Council is contributing to its environmental objective.

Responsive and affordable services

- 76** In planning there has been a real improvement in quality of service, which has been recognised by residents. There has been only a slight improvement in processing major planning applications – from 41 per cent in 2006/07 to 47 per cent in December 2007. Though this performance is still well below the national average, the fact the Council is within a spatial growth area, and therefore processing a relatively large number of complex schemes, is a significant mitigating factor. More notable has been the continued improvement in the performance against other planning indicators, which is now above average. As a consequence, user satisfaction has further improved and is reflected in top quartile satisfaction with the planning service.
- 77** The Council performance on homelessness has improved, albeit from a very low base. The implementation of a preventive policy has resulted in a reduction in the average stay in bed and breakfast accommodation, though the performance is still below the national average. The Council has had a significant impact on the lives of homeless teenagers aged 16 to 17, especially girls. Following a sharp rise in local need, the Council has delivered 20 new units of supported accommodation, with managed pathways to independent living. The Council has also worked closely with the local voluntary sector to develop a two-pronged strategy to address instances of domestic violence in line with that already in place in neighbouring authorities, with support for a sanctuary run by Women's Aid. This is underpinned by support for a two day a week town centre advice centre run by the Sunflower Project. Vulnerable people are now better served.

78 The Council has taken the lead in innovative and successful approaches to neighbourhood management, which have already seen Queensway ward moved out of the top 20 per cent of deprived wards in the country. The CASPAR project led to the Queensway Partnership, a multi-agency approach to neighbourhood renewal in the Queensway and Brickhill wards. The partnership has strong leadership from the Council and high levels of resident participation. A combination of targeted programmes designed to improve local facilities, services and opportunities led to the removal of the Queensway ward from the top 20 per cent of deprived wards in the country. This approach has been replicated on the Hemmingwell Estate with the nationally recognised HOPE project, where the Council contributed to the conversion costs of the Swallow Pub into the Well Community Centre. Residents are at least confident of the sustained commitment of the Council. The new ward survey processes indicate a recent and welcome sign of heightened member consultation and involvement. Attention is now turning to other such wards, such as Swanspool in the town centre. The lives of some of the most disadvantaged groups in the borough have been improved as a consequence.

Community safety

- 79** The Council and its partners have worked hard to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour, but the impact has been limited. The reductions in overall crime in the borough over the past few years have been modest relative to others. Based on BVPIs, the Council was among the worst performing in 2007/08 on domestic burglaries, robberies and vehicle crime and below average on violent crime and some environmentally related crimes, such as abandoned cars. Satisfaction figures are low across a wide range of categories, and fear of crime and anti-social behaviour is high, both generally, and in vulnerable groups, such as young and old people.
- 80** The Council and its partners have been successful in reversing local trends in community safety hotspots such as the Queensway Estate, incorporating the Queensway and Brickhill wards, and in the town centre. In Queensway, the CASPAR project significantly reduced local levels of anti-social behaviour and truancy. This work has been picked up and expanded by the Queensway Partnership, who have piloted the use of 'Smartwater' as an aid to crime detection and prevention, contributing to a 27 per cent decrease in overall crime in the area. The Town Centre Task Force has successfully driven down levels of violent and alcohol related crime in the town centre. These initiatives have improved these areas for local people.
- 81** The Council has made some progress on community cohesion, through financial support and cross-cultural events, but the impact, in terms of improved quality of life for the borough's diverse communities, has been limited. The borough has a long and reputable tradition of welcoming migrants and has generally good relations with its diverse communities, and provides modest but generally appropriate packages of financial support to diverse community groups. It also puts on an impressive array of events throughout the year, many of which attract participation from minority community groups and people at risk of disadvantage. But the lack of active policy engagement and the dearth of programmes and processes explicitly targeted at Wellingborough's diverse communities means the impact of the ongoing financial support is limited. As a result, local diverse communities may not receive the support and assistance they require.

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 Wellingborough Borough Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 14 to 18 July 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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