



BROMSGROVE DISTRICT COUNCIL

EXECUTIVE CABINET – SPECIAL MEETING

FRIDAY, 9TH SEPTEMBER 2005 AT 2.00 P.M.

COMMITTEE ROOM, THE COUNCIL HOUSE, BROMSGROVE

A G E N D A

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MEMBERS: Councillors D. C. Norton (Executive Leader), Mrs. M. M. T. Taylor (Deputy Executive Leader), B. L. Fuller C.B.E., Q.F.S.M., Mrs. J. M. L. A. Griffiths, R. Hollingworth and P. J. Whittaker.

1. To receive apologies for absence
2. Declarations of Interest
3. To confirm the Minutes of the Executive Cabinet held on 24th August 2005
4. Public Questions
5. Progress Assessment – Self Assessment
6. To consider any other business, details of which have been notified to the Head of Administrative Services prior to the commencement of the Meeting and which the Chairman, by reason of special circumstances, considers to be of so urgent a nature that it cannot wait until the next meeting

S. NIXON
Chief Executive

The Council House,
Burcot Lane,
BROMSGROVE,
Worcestershire,
B60 1AA.

1st September 2005

BROMSGROVE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE CABINET

Wednesday, 24th August 2005 at 6.00 p.m.

PRESENT: Councillors Mrs. M. M. T. Taylor (Deputy Executive Leader) (in the Chair), Mrs. J. M. L. A. Griffiths and P. J. Whittaker.

Observers: Councillors W. R. Newnes, N. Psirides J.P. and G. G. Selway.

61/05 **APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors B. L. Fuller C.B.E., Q.F.S.M., R. Hollingworth and D. C. Norton.

62/05 **MINUTES**

The Minutes of the Meeting of the Executive Cabinet held on 17th August 2005 were submitted.

RESOLVED: that the Minutes of the Meeting be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

63/05 **ISSUES ARISING FROM OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEES**

(1) **Taxi Ranks**

Members considered recommendations made by the Housing and Planning Policy Scrutiny Committee in relation to Taxi Ranks. The Chairman of the Taxi Ranks Task Group, Councillor W. R. Newnes, spoke in support of the proposals. It was

RESOLVED: that the recommendations contained in the second report of the Taxi Ranks task Group be approved and the funding of approximately £1,200 be met from the provision for contingencies in the 2005/06 budget.

(2) **Car Parking in Aston Fields for Commuters**

Members considered a recommendation made by the Housing and Planning Policy Scrutiny Committee that a bid for funding be submitted at the appropriate time for consideration in the draft Capital Programme 2006/07, in respect of the provision of additional parking at Aston Fields Social Club for commuters using Bromsgrove Railway Station. It was

RESOLVED:

- (a) that the recommendation be approved; and
- (b) that negotiations towards an appropriate legal agreement be continued, on the basis that they are provisional until funding has been approved, and subject to the proviso that the car park entrance will remain in Russell Croft.

(3) **Building Inspections – Recruitment Issues**

Members considered a recommendation from the Housing and Planning Policy Scrutiny Committee that problems surrounding recruitment of Inspectors in the Building Control Section of the Council be investigated as a matter of urgency. It was

RESOLVED: that the problems surrounding recruitment of Inspectors in the Building Control Section be investigated in the next phase of the restructuring process.

64/05

MOTIONS REFERRED FROM COUNCIL UNDER COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE 10 – IMPROVEMENTS AT BROMSGROVE RAILWAY STATION

Councillor G. G. Selway spoke in support of the motion relating to improvements at Bromsgrove Railway Station. Following discussion it was

RESOLVED:

- (a) that the proposals of Worcestershire County Council for improvements at Bromsgrove Railway Station be welcomed;
- (b) that the necessity for close working between all public bodies participating in the proposed improvements be recognised and endorsed; and
- (c) that letters of support be sent to the Government Office of the West Midlands, the Department of Transport and Network Rail to encourage their financial support for the proposed improvements.

65/05

MONITORING OF THE REVENUE BUDGET 2005/06

The Cabinet considered a report which monitored the position of the Revenue Budget for 2005/06 for the period 1st April to 30th June 2005. The report drew attention to the variances for each service department and provided explanatory comments.

The report also referred to the benefit of extending the Council's current bank contract to 31st March 2007 to allow a full appraisal of the Council's banking requirements to be undertaken.

The Corporate Director (Resources) reported that there had been a delay in purchasing refuse freighters for which there had been a provision of £339,000 within the Capital Budget 2004/05. It would be appropriate to recommend to Council that the sum be transferred to the 2005/06 Capital Budget. It was

RESOLVED:

- (a) that the underspend of £78,000 for the period April 2005 to June 2005 be noted;
- (b) that the variances to net expenditure for the revenue services as set out in the report be noted; and
- (c) that the extension of the bank contract with HSBC until 31st March 2007 be approved;

RECOMMENDED: that Capital Budget slippage of £339,000 from 2004/05 to 2005/06 relating to the purchase of refuse freighters be approved.

66/05

HACKNEY CARRIAGE FARES

The Cabinet considered a report on whether the Council's table of Hackney Carriage Fares should be regarded as a table of fixed fares, or a table of maximum fares. The Council's Licensing Committee had referred the issue to Cabinet for re-examination following discussions between that Committee and representatives of the local taxi trade. Following consideration of the history of the issue and the length of time since the last formal consultation had taken place, it was

RESOLVED: that the matter be deferred and a formal consultation with all Hackney Carriage owners be undertaken.

67/05 **USE OF EXTERNAL FUNDING FOR THE WASH BAY FACILITY AT THE DEPOT**

The Cabinet considered a report on the possibility of funding a shortfall of £18,000 in the Council's Capital Programme in respect of the construction of a vehicle wash bay facility at the Depot, by utilising part of a Waste Performance and Efficiency Grant from DEFRA. Following discussion it was

RESOLVED: that the allocation of £18,000 from the DEFRA Waste Performance and Efficiency Grant, towards the cost of providing a vehicle wash bay facility at the Depot be approved.

68/05 **PERFORMANCE INDICATORS – 1ST QUARTER 2005/06**

Having considered the information relating to the Council's performance during the first quarter of 2005/06 which included national performance indicators and some local indicators, it was

RESOLVED: that the report be noted.

69/05 **APPOINTMENT OF RETURNING OFFICER AND ELECTORAL REGISTRATION OFFICER**

Having considered the report reviewing the appointment of the Council's Returning Officer and Electoral Registration Officer, it was

RECOMMENDED: that the Council appoint Ms. Sue Nixon as Returning Officer and Electoral Registration Officer.

70/05 **CHANGE MANAGEMENT**

The Cabinet considered a report on a proposal to revise the Recovery Plan to provide a clearer presentation to staff and to ensure the Plan is more measurable for Members and the Government Monitoring Board. Consideration was also given to arrangements to manage and increase the pace of change during the recovery period. Following discussion it was

RESOLVED:

- (a) that the Recovery Plan format of an overview programme, supported by detailed key activity programmes and a four month narrative be approved and adopted;
- (b) that upon the arrival of the new Corporate Director (Services), Mr. C. J. Savage be invited to remain on site under his current employment arrangements for the purposes of continuity and to assist Mr. K. Dicks in the delivery of the Recovery Plan;
- (c) that the arrangement referred to in (b) above be reviewed on a monthly basis with both parties able to terminate the agreement; and
- (d) that the Chief Executive and the Corporate Director (Resources) be authorised to vary the areas of expenditure incurred on recovery provided that the expenditure is contained within the sum of £1,099,000 approved for recovery purposes on 22nd June 2005.

71/05 **WINDMILL AVENUE, RUBERY – PROPOSED PARKING IMPROVEMENTS**

Consideration was given to a report on a request previously received from the proprietor of Windmill Stores, Windmill Avenue, Rubery for improvements to on street parking at the front of the property. Following discussion it was

RESOLVED: that in order to facilitate the provision of car parking improvements a bid for funding be made at the appropriate time for consideration in the draft Capital Programme for 2006/07 and that the proprietor be requested to meet half of the costs involved.

72/05 **CUSTOMER ACCESS STRATEGY**

The Cabinet considered a proposed Customer Access Strategy which defines the Council's aims and objectives for customer contact and sets out proposals to amend the methods by which customers access and use Council services. Following discussion, it was

RESOLVED: that the contents of the Customer Access Strategy be approved and endorsed.

73/05 **LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972**

RESOLVED: that, under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the Meeting during the consideration of the item of business the subject of the following Minute on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of "Exempt Information" as defined in Part I of Schedule 12A to the Act, the relevant paragraph of that part being as set out below:-

<u>Minute No.</u> 74/05	<u>Paragraph</u> 7
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74/05 **REQUEST FOR WRITE OFF – SUNDRY DEBTS**

Consideration was given to the report on write-offs of Sundry Debts. The Corporate Director (Resources) requested that consideration be given to amending the existing delegation which authorises the Head of Financial Services to write off irrecoverable debts up to the value of £500. It was

RESOLVED:

- (a) that the Sundry Debts set out in Appendix 1 to the report be written off as irrecoverable;
- (b) that the Standards Committee be recommended to approve the amendment of the delegation as follows:
 - (i) the Head of Financial Services be authorised to write off irrecoverable debts of up to £1,000;
 - (ii) the Head of Financial Services in consultation with the relevant Portfolio Holder be authorised to write off irrecoverable debts of between £1,000 and £2,500;
 - (iii) that consideration of write off of irrecoverable debts of over £2,500 be referred to the Executive Cabinet;
 - (iv) that the Head of Financial Services be authorised to approve the commencement of appropriate proceedings including the service of statutory demands against those debtors who fail to respond to other debt recovery measures.

75/05 **MR. V. HARRISON**

The Chairman referred to the fact that this was the last Cabinet Meeting which Mr. V. Harrison, Head of Administrative Services, would attend as he was shortly to leave the Council's employ. On behalf of Members and colleagues the Chairman thanked Mr. Harrison for all his assistance and hard work over a number of years and wished him well for the future. Mr. Harrison thanked the Members for their good wishes.

The Meeting closed at 7.15 p.m.

Chairman

BROMSGROVE DISTRICT COUNCIL

SPECIAL CABINET

9th September 2005

Progress Assessment – Self Assessment.

Responsible Portfolio Holder	Councillor Margaret Taylor
Responsible Head of Service	Sue Nixon, Chief Executive

1. SUMMARY

- 1.1 To consider the Councils self assessment which needs to be submitted to the Audit Commission on 12th September 2005. This is the prime evidence of the Progress Assessment which is due to commence on site on 11th October.

2. RECOMMENDATION

- 2.1 The Cabinet approves the self assessment including any amendments arising from consultation and agrees its submission to the Audit Commission as a basis of carrying out the Progress Assessment.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 As Members will be aware the Council has been included in a “poor” category for CPA. The Audit Commission will check for improvement in all “poor” Councils through a progress assessment and the inspectors will be on site from 11th to 21st October 2005.
- 3.2 The process is very evidence based and the Audit Commission requires relevant evidenced documents together with our own self assessment to demonstrate improvement made.
- 3.3 This will be supplemented by on site interviews comprising Members, Officers and Partners.
- 3.4 The period the Councils progress will be compared to is the Corporate Governance Inspection 2003 to date.
- 3.5 The self assessment must be deposited with the Audit Commission no later than 12th September 2005. Final draft has been circulated for Member consultation and any amendments will be considered for incorporation before the group leaders meet on 8th September 2005, these comments will be considered at a Special Cabinet on 9th September 2005.

3.6 The Audit Commission will provide the Council with a draft report for comment on 21st November 2005 and will submit a final report on 15th December 2005. This will be a public document.

Background Papers

Corporate Governance Inspection Reports 2001 & 2003
Recovery Plan (November 2004)
Audit Commission Guidelines on Progress Assessment

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Bromsgrove District Council Autumn Progress Assessment

DRAFT

**Thursday, 01
September 2005**



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Progress Assessment

Introduction

The purpose of this statement is to assess what progress has been made since Bromsgrove District Council's last Corporate Governance Inspection in March 2003. A great deal has happened since then – foremost amongst which was the Council's decision to seek Ministerial approval to enter Voluntary Engagement. Needless to say, assessing progress across the Council over a two and a half year time span – a period characterised by upheaval and change - has been far from either easy or straightforward. In this respect, the views of Members, staff and partners has been invaluable in helping to produce what is intended to be a realistic, balanced and objective self-assessment of what has been achieved and what remains to be done.

Our aim is to demonstrate and evidence the following:

- that the Council is clear determined and focussed on its immediate and longer-term objectives and goals;
- that, the essential building blocks for achieving progress are in place;
- that tangible outcomes have been achieved both within the Council and for the communities we serve;
- that the Council is learning from its experience and is realistic about challenges for the future.

It remains the Council's core objective to end Voluntary Engagement by March 2007.

Background

The last Corporate Governance Inspection of Bromsgrove District Council in March 2003 concluded that whilst limited improvements had occurred since the previous inspection in October 2001, progress was still insufficient to reach a satisfactory level and significant challenges were unresolved. In particular, Inspectors highlighted the following key concerns:

- strategic corporate objectives and priorities based on a Community Plan;
- strategic management and leadership capability and capacity;
- member-to-member and member-senior officer relations;
- day-to-day routine financial management and systems;
- a robust medium term budget aligned with the objectives and priorities of the Council's Corporate Plan.[1]

This was in a period of upheaval, uncertainty and change for the Council. The Chief Executive's post was made redundant in November 2000. There were elections and changes to the leadership and Executive Cabinet. In 2002/3 the Council was forced to increase the level of Council Tax by 27%. During the year, a number of senior officers left the Council. An Interim Chief Executive and two Interim Finance Directors were appointed in the following financial year. [2]

Senior elected Members recognised the scale of the task and the need to be more open to external guidance and support. The IDeA was engaged to assess and recommend an Improvement Plan and Senior Management Structure in response to the findings of the CGI report.[3] Moreover, the Audit Commission decided to augment the process of inspection and support by establishing regular quarterly Corporate Governance Inspection monitoring meetings the first of which was held in September 2003.[4]

In response to the IDeA recommendations on strengthening the strategic management capacity of the Council it was subsequently resolved to appoint a permanent Chief Executive and two Corporate Directors responsible for Services and Resources. The Chief Executive and Corporate Director (Services) assumed their responsibilities in March 2004 and the Corporate Director (Resources) began in June 2004.

Inevitably, this period of change and uncertainty directly affected the Council's capacity to respond to the CGI inspection report of 2003. Nevertheless, some important foundations were established – in

particular, putting in place a strategic management team to help define the way forward. Significant progress was also being made in putting the financial system to rights and in establishing clear strategic Corporate Objectives for the Council based on agreeing a Community Plan with Partners and stakeholders. In addition the Council retained its capacity to deliver on major initiatives, for example the transfer of the Housing stock.

The first task of the new Chief Executive was to undertake a root and branch review of what needed to be done in response to the CGI inspection of 2003 and the observations of the Monitoring Team. Her conclusion was that whilst there were many example of good practice across the Council, there were considerable capacity issues to be addressed in addition to major financial, governance and operational concerns. The subsequent resolve of the Council was to be proactive and request Voluntary Engagement with the Government in order to secure guidance and support towards achieving progressive improvement in the performance of the Council.[5]

Voluntary Engagement reflected a new self-awareness on the part of Members and Officers to tackle long-standing and deep-seated weaknesses within the Council. In response to a letter from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister outlining the Ministers' concerns, a comprehensive Recovery Plan was agreed and approved by the Minister in September 2004[6] The Minister also appointed a Lead Official and Monitoring Board to oversee implementation of the two-year plan.

With a new Strategic Management Team in place, a comprehensive Recovery Plan to guide improvement and modernisation within the Council and clear longer-term objectives and goals for the District as a whole, the pace of change has increased dramatically since September 2004. Though much remains to be done, the Council is confident that it can overcome the challenges to come and meet its objective to end Voluntary Engagement status by March 2007.

What is the Council trying to achieve?

The Recovery Plan

The Council's number one priority over the next year is to achieve the aims and objectives of its Recovery Plan.[7]

A great deal of time and effort was invested in ensuring that the Recovery Plan would respond not only to the findings of previous CGI reports and specific concerns raised by the ODPM, but to internal ambitions to become a more modern and responsive Council.

In shaping the Recovery Plan, engagement and consultation workshops and exercises were held with staff, the recognised Trade Unions, elected Members, Partners, Parishes and various representatives of the community. The Plan also took account of issues raised by the Department of Work and Pensions and internal self-assessments on Auditor Score Judgements and Benefit Fraud.

The Recovery Plan identified eight key themes for improvement:

1. Modernisation and Culture Change
2. Strategic Leadership and Political Priorities
3. Performance and Service Improvement
4. Financial Management
5. Political Leadership
6. Corporate Leadership
7. Corporate Management
8. Organisational Development

Details of the issues to be tackled under each theme can be found in the submission of evidence supporting this statement. However, the recovery priorities for the Council may be summarised as follows:

Priority One: resolve issues raised by previous CGI reports and the Minister's letter regard financial planning and budgetary control, the Benefits Service and Depot Services.

Priority Two: Strategic leadership and management
Vision, Values, Corporate Objectives and priorities
Planning and Performance Management

Priority Three: Cultural change and Organisational Development

The Corporate Plan

Over the longer-term the Council now has a clear Vision of what its wants to achieve for the District of Bromsgrove. It's Vision and Values are set out in the Council's Corporate Plan, which also identifies a range of goals and outcomes, under five key objectives:

- To make a major contribution towards achieving a healthy, caring, socially aware community;
- To provide a clean, safe and attractive environment;
- To protect and improve our environment and promote sustainable communities;
- To foster and sustain a strong and expanding economy;
- To provide sustainable culture and leisure opportunities;
- To be an efficient and effective Council [8]

The Council's Vision, Values and Objectives were not determined in isolation. Its Corporate Plan is firmly based on the Community Plan for the District agreed by the Bromsgrove Strategic Partnership of which the Council is a leading member.[9]

The Performance Plan[10]

The Council is aware that notwithstanding the aims and objectives of its Recovery and Corporate Plans, one of its ultimate goals is to deliver tangible outcomes in improved services to the people of Bromsgrove. The Council's overall objective in this respect is to strive towards excellence and top quartile service performance. The Council's ambitions in this respect are set out in its Performance Plan.

Assessment

A key concern of the CGI report of 2003 and the Minister in his letter of September 2004 was that the Council should develop and implement a Corporate Plan using the Community Plan to set priorities. This has been done. Moreover, the Council has involved staff and significantly improved its long-term relationship with the Bromsgrove LSP and other Partnerships - also a key concern of the Minister prior to Voluntary Engagement.

How have we set about delivering what matters?

Capacity

The Council's capacity to drive change alongside delivering day-to-day services and key strategic government and local initiatives has been a challenge from the very beginning. Indeed, management and leadership capacity was raised as an issue by the CGI assessment of 2003.[1]

In response - using SOLACE, the IDeA and other agencies - the Council has brought in experienced personnel to help tackle the additional work load and help deliver key initiatives including dealing with the financial backlog and implementing new financial systems, responding to the concerns of the DWP in respect of Benefits Fraud [11] addressing the need for a clear strategy to improve Waste management and Street Scene Services [12] and reinforcing strategic and corporate management. An additional objective is that the interim personnel will leave a legacy of learning within the Council. However, the Council has also sought guidance and support from Best Practice and Beacon Councils on a range of Recovery Plan issues e.g. Cannock Chase on a Communications Strategy [14] and Blackpool Borough Council on Benefits.[15]

As well as these initiatives, the Council has also sought to bring-on existing talent through secondments and corporate Officer Working Groups on the implementation of the Recovery Plan [7],

Communications [12], Risk Management,[14] Procurement,[15] Customer Access [16] and other strategies. Some of these Working Groups have also involved Members.

Strategic Leadership

Issues of capacity will continue to be a challenge for the Council over the next year, though not as critical as providing strategic leadership.

At officer level, the Council now has a Strategic Management Team comprising the Chief Executive, Corporate Directors Resources and Services, and an Assistant Chief Executive. Interim personnel – the Corporate Director Services and the Assistant Chief Executive, currently fill two of these posts. However, the Council has recently completed an initial recruitment exercise to key senior posts based on its new structure and alignment of services reducing the number of departments from nine to six. Permanent appointments have now been made to the posts of Corporate Director Services and the Assistant Chief Executive. Appointments have also been made to four of the six Heads of Services posts. [17]

Arrangements are currently being made to fill these vacant posts in the short term while securing permanent appointments. The key outcome, however, is that the Council now has a strategic management team over the longer-term and the core elements of a senior management team.

Strategic Leadership also includes Member arrangements and initiatives to address those issues identified by the CGI report of 2003 and by the Minister prior to Voluntary Engagement include:

- an external assessment of member development needs;
- establishment of a Member Development Board to identify and drive forward proposals;
- Member agreement to undertaking a Peer Mentoring exercise;
- revisions to the Council's constitution;

- a root and branch review of the Council's Scrutiny function;
- establishment of a Performance Management Board to overview progress and improvement across the Council.

Member development and skills will also be part of the Capacity Building Programme to be launched in November 2005[18].

Re-organisation

Having resolved the strategic officer leadership of the Council, steps are now in place to move to the new structure and re-organise departments in line with the Council's decision to reduce the number of departments from nine to six. This phase of the re-organisation will start from the beginning of September newly appointed Strategic Management team with the Heads of Service will continue the process of further restructure within the newly created departments.

Planning and Performance Management Framework

The Council has now established a Strategic Planning and Performance Management Framework based on a hierarchy of strategic and operational plans and a medium-term financial strategy.[19]

The planning framework brings together the objectives of the Recovery, Community and Corporate Plans aligned with the Council's medium-term financial strategy. Accordingly, the basic operational planning tool of the Council – Service Business Plans – are required to respond to the strategic objectives of the Council, as are Action Plans for individual services. The final key component in the Council's Planning and Performance Management Framework is Individual Staff Appraisal with goals and targets based on Service Business Plans and Action Plans. This component, completing the Council's Planning and Performance Management Framework is currently being implemented.

Given the importance of Service Business Plans a common format and approach has been introduced and workshops held to help Heads of Service and Managers identify and overcome barriers in meeting the Council's Recovery and longer-term strategic objectives.[20]

In managing performance for the future, the Council has now agreed roles, responsibilities and accountabilities at service team, departmental, strategic management team and Member levels. As mentioned above, a Member Board with specific responsibility for Performance Management has recently been established [21] The Council has also made significant investment in a major IT system – Performance Plus[22]- to ensure that accurate performance data is monitored, accessible to service teams and capable of generating reports to senior officers and Member Boards.

Culture Change

A key element in setting the foundations for long-term culture change has been modernising the Council's corporate strategies and procedures. Given the importance attributed to communications by previous CGI reports and the Minister's letter of concerns, the Council has paid particular attention to this area.

Initiatives introduced or revived during the last year include:

- Briefly Bromsgrove – a twice monthly publication for Staff Members and Parishes;[23]
- Chief Executive Bulletin – a bi-weekly briefing for all staff;[24]
- Introduction of a Team Briefing system for service teams based on the decisions of strategic management team[25];
- Direct Chief Executive briefings for all staff on key developments in the Recovery Plan[26]
- Grapevine – the staff magazine[27]
- Council Chat – twice yearly magazine for all residents[28]

Learning from Beacon Councils, the Council has also produced a comprehensive Communication Strategy,[12] which will shortly be submitted to Cabinet. In addition, progress has also been made on other key Recovery Strategies including Procurement[15], E-Governance[29] Risk Management[14] and Customer Access.[16]

Much remains to be done in this area and the Council has recently submitted a bid to the Capacity Building Fund that includes initiatives on: [18]

- top team development and member development,
- middle management development, and
- performance management across the authority.

As part of the Recovery Plan, the Council is also committed to:[30]

- developing an organisational work plan
- addressing recruitment and retention
- tackling single status

Partnership Working

Partnership working, the development of the Local Strategic Partnership[31] and delivery of the Community Plan[9] were also identified as key improvements in the Minister's letter of September 2004.

The Council has invested a great deal of time and resources in improving its relationships with Partnerships within the District and beyond. Developing a Community Plan has been a key outcome. However, the Council has also been instrumental in promoting the establishment of Theme Groups charged with responsibility for developing work programmes under each strategic objective. To ensure that these developments are sustainable, the Council has appointed a Policy Officer to work directly with the Local Strategic Partnership and make connections with other Partnerships at District and County levels.

The Council has also been a major force in developing and contributing to the work of the Bromsgrove Community Safety Partnership, the Worcestershire Hub and the approach to shared services.

Assessment

One year into its Recovery Plan, the Council is yet to implement key initiatives on culture change and organisational development. These initiatives are scheduled for the coming year. However, issues of capacity remain and risks will be considerably reduced if the bid to the Capacity Building Fund is successful.[18]

What has the Council Achieved or not Achieved to date?

Key Initiatives

Given that the Council is in Voluntary Engagement,[5] the principal criteria by which progress might be measured are against the objectives of the Recovery Plan. By and large, these point to challenges relating to three key services, strategic leadership and management and organisational development. However, It would be a gross misrepresentation to characterise the performance of Bromsgrove District Council as universally 'poor'

Even during the period of upheaval and change following the last CGI inspection in 2003, the Council was able to either set in motion or delivery of a number major initiatives with significant impact on the well-being of people in Bromsgrove. For example:

- Refurbishing and upgrading the Dolphin Leisure Centre. The Centre has since won a 'Quest' Quality Award.
- Creating a new Customer Service Centre in Partnership with Worcestershire County and other neighbouring Councils.
- Building the new Artrix Centre for Arts and Theatre in Partnership with North East Worcestershire College. The Centre is now administered through a Holding Trust.
- The successful Voluntary Transfer of the Council's housing stock to Bromsgrove District Housing Trust.

- Commissioning a major Study aimed at creating a new vision for Bromsgrove Town Centre working with local 'stakeholders'.
- Developing the North Worcestershire Care and Repair Service working in partnership with neighbouring authorities.

Recovery Plan Issues

Over the last eighteen months the pace of change in responding to the objectives of the Recovery Plan has also picked up significantly. Though the Council is currently going through a particularly difficult period with recruitment to Heads of Service posts and departmental re-structuring, it is still possible to discern real change in the underlying capacity and capability of the Council. It needs to be stressed, however, that the Council is only midway through its recovery programme and in large part, any assessment has to be based on 'direction of travel' and 'prospects for the future'.

The Council is investing in that future, it has already obtained permission from the ODPM to capitalise £750,000 to fund part of the recovery programme. It has also applied to the Capacity Building Fund for a further £200,000 targeted at training and organisational development.

In terms of hard outcomes to date against the concerns outlined in the Minister's letter of September 2004 and the objectives of the Recovery Plan, the highlights are as follows:

Financial Planning and Budgetary Control: The Council has now successfully installed and trained personnel in its new AGGRESSO financial system and Payroll system. It has cleared the backlog of work, closing four years worth of accounts. More time is now being spent on providing service managers with up-to-date and accurate budget information. Moreover, a medium-financial plan has been produced, though there needs to be much stronger links with Member priorities and the Council's Service Business Planning process. As it

now stands, the service contrasts sharply with what was found at the time of the last CGI inspection.

- **The Benefits Service:** The Benefits Fraud Inspectorate is shortly to issue a report on the Service. The Council has brought in external expertise and is working with the BFI Performance Development Team to transform the service. Help and assistance has also been obtained from Blackpool Borough Council – A Beacon Council. In addition, a successful bid of over £250,000 was recently made to fund the improvement plan.
- **Depot Services:** The Council will shortly publish a comprehensive strategy to reshape and re-organise its Waste Management and Street Scene Services. Funding developments will be a major challenge for the allocation of resources in the coming financial year. This is not to say that service improvements have not been pursued over the last two years. In March 2004, the Council introduced kerbside collection of recyclables. Despite initial difficulties, the participation rate is high – a 10.92% household recycling rate – and user satisfaction with the service has increased. The service was recently assessed as one of the top performing in the County. Improvements have also been made in Street Cleansing and Grounds Maintenance. Street Cleansing has been adjusted to frequencies that reflect priorities and improvements in productivity have been achieved in grounds maintenance.

Strategic Leadership and Management: The Strategic Management Team has significantly increased the capacity of the Council to drive change. A simple criterion by which this might be measured is the number of initiatives the Team have been able to develop and put in place past four or five months. One criticism of the Council over recent months is that the objectives of its Recovery and Corporate Plans are far too wide-ranging and the Council needs to be far more focussed on what matters. This is now being addressed by better prioritising of what needs to be done and by identifying initiatives that could hamper the recovery process. The Government Monitoring Board has already agreed the principles underlying the Council's new approach to its Recovery Plan and the revised plan will be submitted for consideration in September.

Planning and Performance Management: This has rightly been identified as critical to the Council's all-round improvement. Evidence has already been provided that the Council has a clear short and longer-term vision of what it wants to achieve and a Strategic Planning and Performance Management Framework. However, examination of the Council's Service Business Plans will also show that each service is actively responding to the objectives of the Recovery and Corporate Plans. Moreover, the Council is shortly to implement a new Individual Staff Appraisal System based on goals and targets derived from Service Business Plans. Each team is now expected to manage day-to-day performance using data derived from the Council's 'Performance Plus' information system and Members will also play a decisive role though the recently established Performance Management Board.

- **Organisational Development:** Much remains to be done in this area specifically completing the re-structuring of departments, Single Status and a Workforce Development Programme. Nevertheless, progress has been made in modernising a number of key strategies critical to the organisation as a whole. These include:
 - o a Communications and Consultation Strategy – already mentioned;
 - o Procurement Strategy
 - o Risk Management Strategy
 - o E-Government Strategy
 - o Customer Access Strategy
 - o IT Strategy

Other Service Improvements

Reference has already been made to major initiatives undertaken during the period covered by this assessment and to service improvements directly related to the Recovery Plan. However, it is important not to lose sight of services that have continued performance above average or in the top quartile. These include:

- Planning
- Council Tax Collection
- Business Rate Collection

A more detailed analysis is to be found in the Council's Performance Plan for 2004/5 and latest Performance Reports to Member Boards.

In the light of what the Council has learnt what does it plan to do next?

Even though the pace of recovery has picked up significantly over recent months, it could have been quicker had the Council completed the reorganisation of its strategic management team at an earlier date. In hindsight, the scope of the Recovery Plan was all encompassing and insufficient attention given to identifying clear priorities. The Council also lacked skills and capacity in Project Management and a senior experienced officer should have been appointed with day-to-day operational responsibility for driving progress on Recovery Plan objectives.

Nevertheless, the Council has learnt some valuable lessons. It is prioritising what matters and will shortly appoint a senior officer whose only responsibility will be day-to-day management of the Recovery Plan working to the direction of the Chief Executive and the Strategic Management Team. The Council has also learnt the importance of communications and – in particular – the need to keep staff informed of, and the reasoning behind each initiative during a period of dramatic change and departmental restructuring.

On the positive side, the Council is now far more open to external influences and expertise and to working with Partners to achieve wider objectives. In the words of a member of the Bromsgrove Local Strategic Partnership Board 'three years ago the Council was insular and unresponsive – now it has a 'can do' attitude'.

November this year will be a critical month for the Council with the launch of a number of key initiatives including Top Team Development for both Members and Officers, a range of proposals aimed at building

capacity amongst middle management and service teams, introduction of the new staff appraisal system, implementation of several corporate strategies and Members setting clear priorities for preparation of the 2006/7 Budget and Service Business Plans.

While many cannot as yet see the light at the end of the tunnel, the 'direction of travel' for the Council as a whole is thought to be positive. It is the resolve and determination of Members, Senior Officers and Service Teams to see an end to Voluntary Engagement as a stepping stone towards excellence in all that we do as a Council.

Signatories:

Evidence List Please note this page is not complete and is for the author's information only at present

	Information and Background
1.	CGI report July 2003
2.	Chronology of Key events 2003/4
3.	IdeA Improvement Plan
4.	CGI Monitoring meetings
5.	Application for Voluntary Engagement
6.	ODPM letter of Ministers Concerns
	What is the Council trying to achieve
7.	Recovery Plan –November 2004
8.	Corporate plan 2003/4 and 2004/5
9.	Community Plan
10.	Performance plan
	How have we delivered what matters ?
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