

Embargoed until 00:01 on 12 June 2007

Corporate Assessment

Bromsgrove District Council

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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 After a considerable period of inaction and poor decision making, Bromsgrove have come a long way, from a very low base, in the past year. The change in style at the top of the organisation and internal improvements that have been made is welcomed and recognised by staff and partners, and progress is continuing at the right pace and in the right direction. However this progress is against a baseline of poor corporate and service performance. It is also in comparison to other councils who have continued to improve quickly. Whilst Bromsgrove should continue this positive improvement journey, there is still a lot to do to ensure services are adequate and improvement is maintained and sustained.
- 4 Bromsgrove recognised some time ago that it was not performing adequately and asked for government support and help. Part of this support involved less inspection, and voluntary engagement with an external improvement board. As a result this is the first corporate assessment Bromsgrove have had. Although the overall assessment shows that Bromsgrove are a poor council, in the last year they have been making positive progress. They were however so far behind other councils that even with the positive progress made, they have yet to reach acceptable standards for the areas we inspected.
- 5 There is still a very long way to go before the public will notice a step change and be at the heart of what the council does. There are many areas where the Council is not meeting an acceptable standard and has yet to deliver. Although some poor services have recently improved it is not clear that all improvements are sustainable, there is still work to do on improving customer interface with the Council.
- 6 The Council leadership has a clear understanding of what it wants to achieve in its plans for the area. There are some examples of community leadership such as the equality forum and some difficult decisions have been made although not consistently across the organisation. However, the vision for Bromsgrove has not been consulted on effectively and has yet to drive all the Council's plans and proposals. Not all staff are clear about how they fit into this overall vision, or could easily articulate it. In addition the Council's relationship with the county is not effective, has not been effective for some time and has not shown any immediate signs of improving. While this is not entirely Bromsgrove's responsibility, it has not taken active steps to resolve the situation. This will impact on the ability to deliver the vision.
- 7 Priorities have recently been developed within the Council to help deliver the overall vision. These reflect issues for the Council and for the wider local area and have had an impact on the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP), with clear linkages between their priorities and the Council's. However, there is no functional community plan and the priorities are not very specific and allow most services and interests to claim they are a priority. There is evidence of money starting to move towards priorities but this is not yet embedded and the impact of this is yet to be seen.

- 8 An area of concern is the Council's own capacity to make the changes needed in a reasonable timeframe so that the public would notice the difference. There are many councillors who do not understand their role on the Council. They do not understand how to hold the executive to account, do not understand the role of a modern councillor and do not allow staff to get on with the job. There is still a lack of trust between some councillors and members of staff. This has a destabilising effect on the business of the Council and a negative impact on its reputation. Whilst there has been clear improvement in the recent past, and a more co-operative and effective relationship between parties for the sake of the area, there is still some way to go before acceptable standards have been reached.
- 9 Currently there is good leadership being shown by the Chief Executive and Leader. They share a common agenda for the Council and work together well driving through many of the recent changes. However, there is considerable reliance on these two individuals which is difficult to sustain. In addition, there is limited operational experience in the senior management group and this exposes the Council to considerable risk.
- 10 Bromsgrove has recognised it needs to understand its performance as well as monitor and manage it. There are regular performance reports to managers and councillors and there is challenge within this process. However, performance management has yet to embed in the organisation, with operational managers regularly challenging each other, and performance improvement has not yet resulted from internal recognition, as opposed to external scrutiny. In addition, the Council does not manage complaints in a transparent and standardised way, and has no process in place for managing the performance of partnerships.
- 11 There has been considerable progress in the past year that is recognised by both partners and staff. They have noticed and appreciated a different management style that engages and consults, both internally and externally. There has been significant improvement in financial management which is now assessed as adequate by external audit. There is also evidence of good achievements in community safety, street cleansing and recycling and the public appreciate the community events that are organised. The service on both benefits and planning has improved. However, whilst un-audited data shows positive trends in 2006/07 for some key areas, the baseline is still poor and improvements may not be sustainable. Audited performance for 2005/06 is unimpressive. The public will not have noticed much difference.
- 12 The Council has set up a new customer service centre to deal with public facing services, but is not making the most effective use of the facility. While the top of the organisation is committed to improving services to the public, and many front line staff want to deliver this, there is still too much complacency from the rest of the organisation to the changes that need to be implemented to deliver this. Basic management information such as cost benchmarking is lacking and there is limited understanding of the process re-engineering that will be needed. The Council does not have clear or robust means to determine if it is getting value for money from its services. While the establishment of the customer service centre is a step in the right direction, there is still a long way to go before the vision espoused of 'customer first' delivers for the residents of Bromsgrove.

Areas for improvement

- 13 Place the customer at the heart of Council activity.
 - In order to do this the Council should:
 - base service planning and delivery on the outcomes of both evidence based needs assessment and inclusive consultation; and
 - make customer satisfaction a key deliverable for all managers and staff, and take robust and timely action to address dissatisfaction.
- 14 Develop and enhance councillor capacity in order that they can contribute effectively to the development of a high performing Council.
 - In order to do this the Council should:
 - develop the knowledge and strategic leadership skills of all councillors by establishing their training needs and implementing a comprehensive training plan. This should include opportunities for individual and group mentoring, exposure to how other councils do things and participation in leadership programmes; and
 - require professional working relationships between political groups and between councillors and officers.
- 15 Ensure that there are sufficient resources and capacity to deliver the breadth and pace of change required by the Council in order to deliver high quality services for local residents.
 - Establish the management capacity and skills to deliver the requirements of both corporate recovery and operational service improvements.
 - Integrate value for money into the culture of the Council and its partnerships enabling resources to be saved and redirected to support corporate priorities.
 - Use partnership working to enhance capacity and deliver shared priorities efficiently and effectively.
- 16 Ensure that performance management consistently leads to performance improvement.
 - Integrate performance management with both resource and risk management.
 - Use the scrutiny function to effectively hold the Executive to account particularly relating to major investments such as the spatial project.
 - Manage the performance of partnerships in delivering shared ambitions and priorities.

Summary of assessment scores

Headline questions	Theme	Score*	Weighted score
What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?	Ambition	1	2
	Prioritisation	1	2
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	1	7
Weighted score			15
CPA category			Poor
*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			

**Banding thresholds for determining CPA category

Category	Required score
Excellent	45-60
Good	36-44
Fair	28-35
Weak	21-27
Poor	20 or less

Context

The locality

- 17 Bromsgrove District is in north Worcestershire, covering a large area of approximately 83.9 square miles. Ninety per cent of the District is greenbelt which poses issues for regeneration and housing policy. Despite its predominantly rural nature, road and rail transport routes are good. This contributes to a net commute out of the district of 9,469 people, primarily into Birmingham and local towns.
- 18 The population of the district is 90,550. The population increased by 0.8 per cent between 2003 and 2004 (the joint highest in Worcestershire) mainly attributable to inward migration as a result of a number of large housing developments. It is also set to expand by a further 0.9 per cent between 2006 and 2010. The black and minority ethnic population (BME) is 3.3 per cent, which is low for the region and low nationally. There are 37,798 households in the district. Over 25 per cent of households contain only one older person and an estimated 6,964 households in the district have one or more members with identified special needs which is well above the national average.
- 19 The economic picture of the district is generally very positive. The district ranks 293rd out of 354 Councils on the national index of multiple deprivation (2004) making the district one of the least deprived nationally. It has no wards in the top 20 per cent most deprived in England. Four thousand and fifty households are in receipt of housing or Council tax benefits in the district, one of the lowest figures in Worcestershire. The mean household income is £36,906 which is the highest in the County. The closure of the Longbridge car plant in April 2005 resulted in the loss of 5,850 jobs and contributed to increased unemployment levels in the district. However in the intervening period these have returned to a very low level of 2.5 per cent.
- 20 There are two major areas of economic concern within the district, the redevelopment of the Longbridge site and Bromsgrove town centre. Bromsgrove and Birmingham Council's are working together to produce an Area Action Plan for the former MG Rover site. Local residents feel that Bromsgrove Town Centre needs a major overhaul to encourage local shopping and compete with neighbouring shopping centres. The number of VAT registered businesses in the district has also fallen in recent years although the Council is supporting new small business development.
- 21 Eighty three per cent of households are owner occupier, the 11th highest figure in England and Wales. House prices are increasing faster than the national average with the average house price being £219,949. The provision of sufficient affordable housing is a key challenge for the Council. It has a target of 80 units of affordable housing a year for the next five years. It has been operating a planning moratorium on new development for the last three years with only affordable housing developments being built.

- 22 Generally, the district's population is healthier than the regional average. Teenage pregnancies increased marginally across Worcestershire from 2000-2003 but the overall rate is significantly lower than England as a whole. Levels of crime are generally reducing. Ninety seven per cent of residents feel safe during daytime and 70 per cent after dark. Drug offences are low.

The Council

- 23 Bromsgrove District Council has been a poor council for some time. It recognised that it was not providing the service to the public that it should and that it needed support and assistance rather than inspection. On this basis, in 2004, it was given a Corporate Performance Assessment (CPA) rating of poor and it entered into voluntary engagement with the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). As a result this is the first corporate assessment that Bromsgrove have had. A progress assessment for the Council was completed in December 2005. It identified a positive direction of travel but some significant remaining challenges if the Council were to emerge from engagement in 2007. As a result of the assessment, six priorities for improvement were agreed. These formed the basis of the Council's recovery/improvement plan. The Council requested an early CPA against the new 2006 Framework in order to validate their Improvement Plan and to identify further areas of improvement.
- 24 The Council has a majority Conservative administration, with 24 Conservatives, six Labour, six independents, two 'Wythall Residents Association' and one Liberal Democrat. The Council operates a modernised political structure with the Leader/Cabinet model, supported by three non-Executive Boards: Audit Board, Scrutiny Steering Board and Performance Management Board, the latter chaired by the Leader of the Opposition. There are also Planning, Standards and Licensing Committees.
- 25 The Council has had a recent history of frequent changes in senior management and political leadership. It has a new Corporate Management Team (CMT), with a Chief Executive appointed in March 2007. At this time there was also a change of Leader. An experienced ex-London Borough Chief Executive has been appointed as a temporary Improvement Director in order to provide additional strategic support and mentoring to the Acting Chief Executive.
- 26 The Council supported the development of the Bromsgrove Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) in 2003. The partnership produced a Community Plan 2003 to 2010. However this plan is now considered to be out of date and is no longer driving the focus for strategic planning and delivery of services. The Council accepts that it needs to improve and clarify the roles of its partners within its plans. The re-launch of the Community Plan is seen as key to this, particularly with respect to the delivery of the Local Area Agreement (LAA).

- 27 The Council has a net budget of £11.313 million (2007/08), a planned Council Tax increase of 4.99 per cent and Government Grant of £4.730 million. The projected level of balances at end of financial year 2006/07 is £1.434 million. Capital expenditure levels from the Council's own resources have been set at £1 million per annum with capital reserves for 2007/08 standing at £13.165 million. The Council's reserves are predominantly from the sale of its housing stock to Bromsgrove District Housing Trust. In September 2006 the Council approved a medium term financial plan for 2007/08 to 2009/10. It plans to set a balanced budget for each of the next three years with annual planned council tax increases of 4.99 per cent. The Council employs 454 staff across all services.

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

Ambition

- 28 The Council is performing inadequately in this area. The Council is not working effectively with local residents and partners to develop and communicate its ambitions. The ambitions are not based on robust needs analysis. In general, leadership shown by councillors from all political groups is weak and whilst there are some signs of community leadership, it is inconsistent. The District does not have a functional Community Plan.
- 29 The Council has made progress in defining its ambitions over the last year. Since May 2006 the Council has had a new Leader, Chief Executive and Senior Management Team. They have brought a focus to the organisation characterised by the development of a new corporate vision, values and objectives adopted by the whole Council. The Council's Vision is: 'Working together to build a District where people are proud to live and work, through community leadership and excellent services'. The Vision and the Values that underpin it: Leadership, Partnership, Equality and Customer First, have been developed through a change programme 'Building Pride'. The Council has developed four objectives; regeneration, improvement, sense of community and well being, and environment. This links with the recently revised priorities for the LSP.
- 30 However, the Council has not engaged external stakeholders in the development of its vision or communicated it effectively. The Council's vision and values have been revised internally by councillors and senior officers. Contributions from the community, other stakeholders and staff have been limited, as they decided to use existing information, rather than undertake full consultation, in the interests of speed and efficiency. Until recently, the Council's strategic focus has been on re-building the Council to be fit for purpose. As a result the Council's ambitions for its communities are not yet fully developed. Partner organisations are unaware of the Council's vision and do not see how they fit into the Council's improvement plans. This means that the Council cannot be sure that its vision reflects the needs of local people and partners.
- 31 Analysis and intelligence of community needs is not well developed but improving. The Council has historically undertaken some needs analysis of its local communities. This was not robust or sufficiently evidenced based to enable it to inform the new corporate vision and objectives. The Council has not collaborated with partner organisations to assess local needs. However more recently the Council and its partners have undertaken some more robust analysis of older people's needs to inform the older people strategy. The Council has insufficient information to understand its local community.

- 32 Consultation is not comprehensive and has limited impact. Consultations on the Council's vision were limited to a small number of local resident and stakeholder focus groups. Consultations with service users are not influencing service planning or delivery. However the Council has invested in improving consultation through a senior appointment and the adoption of consultation guidelines. It has actively engaged local people and communities in the Local Development Scheme. Vulnerable groups are now consulted through the Equalities and Diversity group. As a result the Council cannot be sure that it is delivering services which are important to local people.
- 33 Political leadership by all councillors is not effectively underpinning the ambitions of the Council. The Council has a poor track record in providing clear leadership. Whilst the current leader has a strong leadership style and a clear vision for what he wants to achieve for Bromsgrove, councillors in general are not demonstrating the leadership associated with their role and are reluctant to embrace new developments. Consequently the absence of political leadership from councillors is inhibiting the delivery of its ambitions.
- 34 The Council recognises the need to deliver community leadership but it is not demonstrating this consistently. Leadership has often focused on the interests and aspirations of individuals rather than a Council wide strategic approach. The 2007/08 planning process has been more strategically driven but it is too early to identify the outcomes from this. There is a willingness to take some difficult decisions but implementation is inconsistent. Community engagement is developing through two neighbourhood action zones although impact is as yet limited. Leadership for vulnerable groups is being demonstrated through the equalities and diversity forum. Overall however, this inconsistency means that the Council is not always providing effective leadership for the community it serves.
- 35 Ambitions for communities are not fully developed or communicated through a Community Plan. The LSP agreed a Community Plan for 2003 to 2010. This is now out of date, it is not owned by the local community and not providing an overarching vision for the District. A new vision and priorities for the LSP have been developed although this has not been subject to full community consultation, ratification or publication. The vision and priorities are forming the basis of revisions to the Community Plan which links into the developing Local Area Agreement (LAA). This means that there is not a robust strategy in place for delivering ambitions in partnership with others.
- 36 The Council is not working effectively with the County Council to develop and deliver its ambitions. Councillor relationships with the County Council are not effective, have not been for some time and are not improving. There is a level of antagonism between the District and County which is impacting on their ability to work together. There is a lack of trust at political level reinforced by recent disagreements about shared service proposals, local government re-organisation and plans for community engagement. Whilst this is not the sole responsibility of the Council, it has not taken active steps to resolve the situation. This has impacted on Bromsgrove's ability to deliver its vision which relies on a number of county functions.

Prioritisation

- 37 The Council is performing inadequately in this area. Although the Council has identified its priorities in consultation with others, they are sufficiently vague to enable most areas to claim they are a priority. Resources have started to be targeted towards some priorities but currently only a small proportion of the overall budget. As they are not sufficiently specific it may be difficult for the Council to justify disinvestment in areas. The Council is making progress in delivering in priority areas although this is not consistent, for example corporate objectives are effectively linked into business planning and development reviews for individual staff but not all partnerships contribute effectively to the delivery of these priorities.
- 38 The Council's four corporate objectives are each underpinned with three year priorities (2007/2010). The key priorities for regeneration are Bromsgrove town centre, Longbridge and Housing. Improvement focuses on the priorities of customer service, reputation and performance. Sense of community and well being prioritises community influence and community events as a key way in which the Council can encourage social cohesion in the district. The corporate objective of the environment prioritises a clean district and planning.
- 39 Corporate priorities are in place and influencing service planning but they are insufficiently specific to drive the redistribution of resources. Corporate priorities reflect sub-regional and local issues although links with national policy frameworks are tenuous. They are based on the outcomes of previous consultations, stakeholder events, public focus groups and the work of staff champions. They are being integrated into corporate systems and are beginning to provide a focus for business planning and performance management. However the corporate priorities do not provide sufficient focus for service management, allowing most interests to claim they are a priority. The priorities are not sufficiently specific to allow a clear identification of non priorities which will support decisions around areas of disinvestment.
- 40 The Council is underpinning its priorities with additional resources but this is not yet comprehensive and limited to small amounts. The Council can demonstrate additional capital and revenue investments in priority areas such as street cleaning, ICT infrastructure and customer service. However there is less evidence of disinvestment in areas which are not prioritised. For example a reduction of posts in Leisure has not released resources which have subsequently been reinvested into priority areas. A commitment to moving money towards priorities is evidenced in the 2007/08 budget process but it is too early to identify the full impact of the changes. The transfer of additional resources is resulting in service improvements in priority areas.

- 41 The Council is taking effective action to deliver improvements in priority areas. In areas where the Council has been required to focus through voluntary engagement there are clear targets that have led to corporate improvements, for example, in waste management. Progress is being made in the delivery of regeneration, which is another Council priority. The Council has focused with its partners on the opportunities offered by the regeneration of the former MG Rover site for which an area action plan has been developed. The plans should enable the Council to deliver more affordable housing allowing it to achieve its own targets and meet the demands of local people. Whilst the Council is delivering around 75 new affordable homes per year, against a target of 80, it is constrained by a planning moratorium on new housing, in place for the last three years. There is less progress with the redevelopment of Bromsgrove town centre although the Council is currently seeking to identify a preferred partner to drive the redevelopment planning forward.
- 42 Partnership working is not contributing to the delivery of the Council's objectives. Partner organisations report a more positive approach to partnership working but political engagement continues to be limited and communication inconsistent. Partnership working with the Bromsgrove Housing Trust and many Parish Councils has historically been poor and is still not fully effective. The LSP has been ineffective for a number of years and whilst action has been taken to improve this it is too early to demonstrate impact. In contrast the crime and disorder partnership has consistently worked effectively and contributed to reductions in most areas of crime. Proactive working with partners increases both capacity and the resources available to deliver priorities.
- 43 The Council is not demonstrating to the public and its partners that it is taking timely and transparent decisions. Public and partners feel that the Council is overly bureaucratic in the way it deals with issues. Whilst there is some evidence that the Council is willing to listen it continues to be poor at providing feedback to partners and local residents about decisions and plans. The new corporate priorities have not yet been effectively communicated to local people and partners. A lack of feedback on decisions following consultation is affecting the public's trust and confidence in the Council.
- 44 The Council has taken effective action to improve its corporate systems to underpin the delivery of corporate priorities. Business and performance management has been developed through a business planning framework. A customer first strategy and communications strategy are now in place. The Council has recently developed a plan for managing its assets although this is not yet embedded in the operation of the organisation. Alignment of strategies is partial because a strategic framework has only recently been agreed. Performance and financial frameworks are at an early stage of integration, with 2007/08 planning being the first time the integrated approach has been used. In addition, planning and budget cycles have not been linked, although the new planning cycle for 2007/08 seeks to address this. The integration of corporate systems via the 2007/08 planning cycle is leading to an effective focus on the delivery of corporate priorities.

16 Corporate Assessment | What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?

- 45** The Council is positively engaging with black and minority ethnic groups (BME) and vulnerable groups. The Equalities and Diversity Forum is providing an effective way for the Council to listen to the needs of minority and vulnerable groups. The Business plans for 2007/08 contain information on equalities and diversity and how the service area will meet equality standards. The Council has effectively raised the profile of equality amongst councillors who have benefited from diversity seminars although some key partners are unaware of the Equality and Diversity Forum and have not made use of this resource. As a result of a focus on this area the Council has a better understanding of the specific needs of these groups.

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

Capacity

- 46 The Council is performing inadequately in this area. There is insufficient councillor and officer capacity to deliver the pace and breadth of change required by the Council. With the exception of improved officer training, actions taken to improve capacity are temporary or are too early to be able to demonstrate impact. Some issues relating to the effective management of the workforce and reputation management have not been addressed.
- 47 Councillor capacity is weak, lacks effective challenge and is too reliant on a few individuals. Councillors are struggling to come to terms with the modern councillor role. They are not working effectively together to drive and focus on improvement. There remains a level of distrust between officers and politicians. Some councillors continue to demonstrate obstructive and critical behaviour and are too focused on the details of operational management. The pace of councillor development has been slow and attendance at training is generally poor. There is limited strategic debate taking place at full Council with a lack of clarity on political and managerial roles and responsibilities. Councillor understanding and willingness to engage with ethical governance is variable and the Council is actively investing to ensure consistently high standards. As a result the lack of capacity amongst councillors is inhibiting the Council's recovery and the delivery of corporate objectives.
- 48 Capacity at senior management level is fragile and under-resourced. While the senior management team is predominantly new and has limited experience of corporate management at this level, it has demonstrated that it has the skills to drive improvements both to corporate systems and the culture of the organisation. The Improvement Director is highly experienced, providing support to drive improvements in operational service delivery, but he is an interim appointment. While there have been some new middle management appointments, there is still insufficient experience of good strategic and operational service delivery at the top of the organisation to provide the challenge and deliver the extent and pace of change required of the Council.

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

- 49** Staff and management capacity to deliver service and corporate improvements is limited. Service management lacks consistency and contributes to anxieties within the changing services. There is evidence of silo working within the Council which impacts on its strategic focus. The loss of key posts through sickness or a failure to appoint have a direct impact on performance, for example, in planning and benefits. A number of staff are new and inexperienced limiting their immediate impact on service delivery. Insufficient staff capacity is preventing the Council from delivering its corporate objectives and achieving service improvements.
- 50** Financial planning has improved considerably in recent years, but is still not yet supporting the delivery of corporate priorities or value for money effectively. The medium term financial strategy is not clearly linked to the Council priorities, nor does it provide a means of delivering those priorities. It does not seek to provide opportunities for disinvestment and does not look beyond three years. However, through the 2007/08 planning process the Council has begun to identify linkages and look for areas of disinvestment. The Council recognises that it cannot demonstrate value for money. It does not have sufficient management information to form a view about which services are not providing value for money. A more robust approach to strategic planning and the integration of financial and performance information during the recent planning cycle has improved the Council's ability to meet its stated priorities and deliver value for money.
- 51** Key issues relating to staff management have not been addressed effectively. There is no workforce planning and little progress with the development of a single status review. Consultation with unions over policy initiatives and single status is ineffective. The effective management of poor performance and sickness absence is not yet evident throughout the organisation. Long-term personnel issues are still to be resolved. A new performance development review system has been introduced but it is too early to identify changes as a result of this. This limits the capacity of the organisation to deliver its objectives.
- 52** The Council does not manage its communications with the public effectively. Public, partners and Council staff report that frequent negative press reports and public bickering by councillors has a significant impact on the Council's already poor reputation. Poorly run Council meetings demonstrate a clear lack of understanding of the constitution and contribute to a poor perception from the public gallery. The Council is reactive to dealing with external communications with little investment in this area. The Council's poor reputation is having a negative impact on public confidence and detracting from its ability to deliver services effectively.

- 53 The Council is investing extensively in its information and computing technology (ICT) infrastructure but benefits realisation is uncertain. It is currently investing £6 million in its spatial project which is designed to develop a single source of customer information and increase the efficiency of business processes. However, e-government targets for 2005 have still not been achieved. The spatial project is ambitious but it is not fully understood by councillors and officers. The achievement of benefit realisation such as significant cost savings remains uncertain.
- 54 Senior management is increasingly providing positive leadership. Both staff and partners report that senior managers are providing a positive style of leadership with a clearer business focus and reporting lines. The Chief Executive is described as open and accessible and this is seen by staff to be contributing to improvements in morale. Recent back to floor visits and improved visibility of managers have been valued by staff and managers. There is a view amongst stakeholders that senior managers are ambitious to move the Council forward and that leadership has improved.
- 55 Effective action has been taken to improve political consensus and cross-party working but significant challenges remain. Senior councillors have had external support to change behaviour and engage in cross-party working. The Leader has introduced regular meetings with the leader of the Opposition which has contributed to an improved political consensus. Councillors, from all political groups, are being engaged in the work of non executive committees such as scrutiny, PMB and audit. However there is infrequent contact between the ruling and independent group due to a lack of trust and personal animosity and this is unlikely to improve in the immediate future, to the detriment of more effective working.
- 56 The Council has invested effectively in training for staff. The Council has put in place realistic building blocks to improve staff capability and increased its annual training budget. All managers have signed up to the Council's own management charter; 'The Bromsgrove Way' which is underpinned by a management training programme designed to improve services and deliver corporate priorities. Staff acknowledge that there is improved access to both technical and corporate training such as Customer First training. Effective training is resulting in improvements in both staff capability and capacity.

Performance management

- 57 The Council is inadequate in this area. Performance management is not effectively driving sustained improvements in services with outcomes which can be recognised by the public. Target setting has not been SMART¹; this has been recognised by the Council and is being reviewed. Whilst there is increasingly effective monitoring of performance by senior managers and councillors, as part of an established performance framework, this is not embedded in the culture of the organisation. Corporate systems for the management of partnerships and complaints are not developed.
- 58 Performance management is not leading to consistent and sustained improvements in service delivery. Whilst monitoring systems are identifying underperformance, the development of plans which lead to sustained performance improvements is inconsistent. The Performance Management Board is offering some challenge to poorly performing areas. The impact of the Board is mixed with issues such as complaints being raised repeatedly without resolution. Exception reports identify that actions to improve performance are not always implemented or have been ineffective.
- 59 Target setting is ineffective but improvements are planned for the 2007/08 business planning process. Action plans do not consistently include robust SMART¹ targets. Targets for 2006/07 are not clearly focused or linked to any priorities. A number of improvement plan targets have had to be reviewed because they are too challenging. Benchmarking is informing target setting in some areas such as planning but it is not embedded across the organisation. Targeted outcomes have been too ambitious and difficult to measure, for example, 'Develop councillors to be effective leaders'. This means that the way the Council sets targets is not leading to achievable improvements which focus on outcomes for local people.
- 60 Performance management is not yet integrated with resource and risk management. The 2007/08 planning cycle has been the first time that the Council has sought to integrate financial and service planning. It does not routinely bring together information on financial performance, service indicator analysis and key improvement actions. Performance management is not integrated with risk management; although progress is being made. Risk management is weak but developing and there are appropriate strategies in place for bottom-up risk management. Until this approach is embedded the impact of risks and resources, on the performance of services, cannot be assessed effectively.

¹ SMART- Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Resourced, Timed.

- 61 Complaints management is ineffective. Complaints management is insufficiently robust to support performance improvement as there is no systematic means of managing the process. Whilst there is a complaints policy, departments are not keeping within the guidelines. There is a lack of leadership at both councillor and officer level to address this, although there has been a decision taken to purchase software which should enable better complaints monitoring and management in the future. Ineffective complaints management means that the Council is missing opportunities to improve services for local people.
- 62 Performance management of partnerships is not in place. The Council acknowledges that it has had insufficient capacity to develop performance systems for partnerships. There is no evidence of a consistent approach to collective review of performance across partnerships. However, as part of the review of the LSP, there are plans to introduce performance systems. This means that the Council does not know how effectively and efficiently partners are contributing to the delivery of its corporate objectives.
- 63 Performance management of corporate projects is inconsistent which contributes to slippage against published targets. A range of key developments and projects designed to support the recovery of the Council have been delayed over the last year. For example, the training needs analysis for councillors was delayed from August 2006 to February 2007 because forms were not returned. The sickness absence policy was delayed from September 2006 to December 2006. Councillors are not monitoring projects effectively, for example, a working group of three councillors is monitoring the implementation of the spatial project but it has no terms of reference or formal reporting lines.
- 64 A corporate performance management framework has been developed and implemented across the Council. Performance improvement is identified as a key priority for development. Performance management systems have been revised to take into account the resources and capacity available in the Council to deliver them. The Performance Management framework links the Council plan, service business plans and individual staff plans. The corporate improvement plan links into the framework and is delivered through service business plans. The performance framework is leading to an increased focus on performance improvement across the organisation.
- 65 Extensive performance reporting and monitoring is in place. Progress against the Council's improvement plan is monitored both internally and externally by the Government monitoring Board. The Council has identified the top 45 performance indicators which are monitored on a quarterly basis by the executive cabinet and the performance management board where underperformance is challenged. Portfolio holders and officers work closely to monitor service delivery. Portfolio holders are briefed by heads of service and the corporate director services fortnightly.

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

- 66** Performance is challenged at a senior level but this has yet to be embedded in the culture of the organisation. Effective performance monitoring at a corporate level has only recently been introduced and impact is variable. Action is being taken to raise awareness of performance management within departments but this has yet to be embedded and is contributing little to service improvement. Councillors are not consistently able to identify important performance issues and have the level of debate required to drive performance management. There remains a focus on past mismanagement with little reference to the priorities for improvement and how to interrogate these. The increased challenge to underperforming service areas is resulting in improvements in performance.

What has been achieved?

Achievement and improvement

- 67** The Council is inadequate in this area. Performance in 2005/06 was poor in the majority of service areas. Achievements were predominantly internally focused and not about outcomes for local people. Performance improvement has been slow and in some areas there is insufficient evidence that improvements can be sustained. The Council is investing in improvement and over the last year improving senior management and corporate focus have resulted in tangible improvements in both corporate and service performance.
- 68** The Council's overall performance in 2005/06 and first quarter of 2006/07 was poor. Forty three per cent of performance indicators were comparable to the worst performing district Council's in England. These included a poor performance in street cleaning, planning and benefits. Many achievements are internally focused and would not be noticed by the public. Achievements identified for 2005/06 in the 'Council Results' document frequently focus on internal processes such as agreeing a programme for future planning work. Other listed achievements reflect what might normally be expected of any council such as delivering training as required by legislation or delivering Statutory Accounts within deadline. Whilst these do reflect progress for the Council there are limited outcomes for the public.
- 69** Performance improvements are slow and have not been sustained in key areas. In 2005/06, 57 per cent of performance indicators failed to achieve the Council's own target. Performance in 44 per cent of indicators declined compared to the previous year including key areas such as sickness absence. Planning performance fell and the Council has been designated as planning standards authority for 2007/08 in one area. The Council has been slow in addressing significant issues with performance in the benefits service. Performance with respect to corporate health is improving slowly but remains poor. The Council accepts that some of its original targets were too ambitious and that pace of change is being constrained by availability of resources.
- 70** There is a lack of customer focus throughout the middle of the organisation. Whilst councillors, managers and frontline staff identify the importance of customer focus this is not embedded in the delivery of services. There has not been a strong customer focus culture across the whole Council since 2003. Low staff morale and reduced councillor and management capacity to focus on customer service have contributed to this. Local residents and partners report that Council departments are often unresponsive. The culture of the Council continues to be delivering services which it thinks customers need. Whilst a customer first strategy and training has been introduced its impact is limited and some staff dealing directly with the public have had no training in customer care. A lack of customer focus means that the Council does not have a clear view of how its services are regarded.

- 71 The potential benefits of the customer service centre (CSC) have not been fully realised. The Customer Service Centre was established quickly creating some significant issues. In particular systems are still not in place to bring CSC and back office functions together effectively. Whilst customer feedback about the CSC is generally positive there is a lower degree of confidence about the service provided by the appropriate Council departments after initial contact. Some residents who did not live in Bromsgrove Town were unaware that the CSC existed. There is inconsistent support to fully realise the benefits of the CSC.
- 72 The Council is achieving well in a small number of priority areas. The Council has improved its financial management which is now rated as adequate by external auditors. The Council is working effectively with partners to reduce some aspects of crime. There has been a 32 per cent decrease in headline crime figures over the last three years although vehicle crime remains high. The Council has put in place a recycling infrastructure that is allowing it to exceed government standards albeit at high cost. Recycling rates have increased significantly to 47 per cent. Improvements in financial management resulted in the closure of the 2005/06 accounts on time.
- 73 The Council's overall performance is now improving, but from a very low base. The Council has also maintained a strong focus on its improvement activities, with 79 per cent of the actions in the Improvement Plan currently on target or less than one month behind. Unaudited data provided by the Council provides evidence of further improvements across a range of service areas. In the second and third quarters of 2006/07 there have been significant improvements in aspects of benefits performance and the current speed of dealing with minor and other planning applications is now assessed to be comparable to the best performing district councils in England. The Council has received external accreditations for aspects of service quality including QUEST accreditation for leisure facilities and ISO 9000 in Environmental Health.
- 74 Community events are well received but some residents feel that they are too focused on Bromsgrove Town. The Council is prioritising community events as a means of encouraging social cohesion. Local people praise the street theatre, the fireworks display and summer activities for children. However, it is noted that many of the events are based in Bromsgrove Town and residents from other parts of the district are not always aware of them. Some residents were unaware of the Artrix centre and the programme of entertainment it provides. Community events will not impact on social cohesion for the district if they are seen to be inaccessible to some residents.
- 75 The Council is investing appropriately to improve performance in corporate functions. Robust and timely financial information is available to service managers. Managers are supported in the implementation of corporate policies such as the management of sickness absence. The implementation of consultation and communications strategies is being supported by additional staff appointments in order to deliver key improvements in customer services and reputation management.

- 76** The Council is investing in underperforming service areas. Capital funding is being allocated to further improve waste collection and recycling. There has been additional investment in new staff and vehicles for street cleaning. Capacity issues in strategic housing, planning and development control have been addressed through additional staff appointments. The Council is investing effectively in the building blocks in order to support its recovery and deliver service improvements.

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 Bromsgrove District Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from December 2006 to June 2007.
- 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.