

Comprehensive Performance Assessment

Bromsgrove District Council

March 2009



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Introduction

- 1 Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) is the means by which the Audit Commission fulfils its statutory duty under Section 99 of the Local Government Act 2003 to make an assessment, and report on the performance, of local authorities. Corporate assessment is one element in the overall assessment that leads to a CPA score and category.
- 2 The purpose of the corporate assessment is to assess how well the Council engages with and leads its communities, delivers community priorities in partnership with others, and ensures continuous improvement across the range of Council activities. It seeks to answer three headline questions which are underpinned by five specific themes.

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

- Ambition
- Prioritisation

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

- Capacity
- Performance management

What has been achieved?

- Achievement

Executive summary

- 3 In early 2007 Bromsgrove District Council underwent its first comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) where it was judged to be 'poor'. Since then the Council has achieved much, often from a very low base, and its overall performance is now 'fair'.
- 4 Since the last CPA, the Council has made significant progress in addressing the weakness previously identified. Much of the work has focused on putting the processes and 'building blocks' in place that were absent in early 2007 and these are now starting to make an impact. Clear political and managerial leadership and stronger management have led to a greater focus on improvement and priorities and these changes are recognised and valued by the community and partners.
- 5 The Council, together with its partners, now has clear ambitions for the community which are informed by community needs and aspirations. The overarching vision for the district is 'Working together to build a district where people are proud to live and work, through community leadership and excellent services.' A framework of plans is in place linking local and county wide ambitions and these are underpinned by business plans, team plans and individual personal appraisals to ensure a greater focus on delivery. External communication, whilst improved, is not always effective in ensuring messages are received and understood and feedback on decisions and results of consultation is inconsistent.
- 6 The key priorities underpinning the vision have been refined and now better reflect customer, stakeholder and staff ambitions. Consultation and engagement has included work with a wide range of stakeholders including minority and vulnerable individuals and groups. The five 2007/08 priorities have been further refined and made more specific for 2008/09. The 2008/09 priorities are: a thriving market town and housing; improved customer service; a sense of community; and clean streets and recycling. Resource allocation is linked to priorities. The Council is clear that any service area that does not contribute to the delivery of the priorities is a non-priority and will be required to find savings or have resources taken away and redirected to areas supporting delivery of priorities.
- 7 Political and managerial leadership is strong and gaining respect from the community and partners. This is leading to more effective partnership working. The internal working of the Council has improved with codes of conduct to clarify roles and responsibilities and there is a greater level of trust between councillors and officers. An adequate level of financial management is now in place. However, some improvements are new and it is too early to see the impact - for example in ICT. Comprehensive workforce planning is not in place and job evaluation and delays caused by external factors, in resolving single status is having some adverse impact on capacity. Whilst the culture of the Council has changed there does however remain the strong external perception that a small minority of councillors are behaving in a disruptive or confrontational manner. This behaviour does not help the Council change and improve its external image and reputation and is undermining work with partners and external organisations.

Executive summary

- 8** Improved management of performance and service delivery is securing improvement in services. Regular integrated reporting of performance and financial information is now in place. Risks are now considered and reported. However, since much of the Council's effort since the last CPA has been on putting in place and embedding internal processes, much of the focus of the performance management system has been on outputs rather than outcomes that the public would recognise. Scrutiny has limited impact with an absence of a robust and constructive challenge by councillors of performance and decisions. Project evaluation and the analysis of complaints are not fully effective.
- 9** Improvement in performance is notable but this has, in many instances, been from a very low base and overall performance remains below that of other councils. Audited performance indicator (PI) data for 2007/08 shows that between 2006/07 and 2007/08 79 per cent of PIs improved. The Council has 25 per cent of PIs in the best 25 per cent in the country which is below the district council average of 33 per cent. More recent unaudited data provided by the Council indicates that performance in many areas has been maintained or continued to improve - in October 2008 74 per cent of PIs were stable or improving. In 2006/07, customer satisfaction was below average but more recent unaudited data suggests satisfaction levels for street cleanliness and recycling facilities have risen.
- 10** Plans to regenerate the town centre are at an early stage and there are few outcomes that the public would recognise. Most of the focus to date has been on developing an area action plan and an issues and options paper is currently out to consultation. The Council's strategic housing service has improved and a variety of initiatives are helping to deliver housing to meet local needs. Customer service has been improved with the opening of a customer service centre known as the Worcestershire 'hub' which is operated jointly by the Council and Worcestershire County Council, and some services are tailored to meet the specific needs of users. However, some services still do not give enough attention to customer service.
- 11** Improved working with partners and local people is enhancing the sense of community. An effective crime and disorder reduction partnership has helped reduce crime levels and a number of initiatives are effectively addressing concerns about the fear of crime. The needs of young people are being addressed but it is less clear what has been delivered to meet the needs of the significant and increasing number of older people. High recycling rates are being sustained. The Council exceeded its statutory recycling and composting target but the overall amount of household waste collected per person remains relatively high, as do collection costs. Street cleanliness has improved and recent unaudited figures indicate improved satisfaction rates.

Areas for improvement

- 12** The Council should strengthen its customer focus so that its actions meet the needs of its community:
- a culture of customer focus should be fully established at all levels within the council.
 - strategies, contracts, project specifications and business plans and accompanying action plans need to have clearly identified outcomes that the public would recognise, to deliver the outcomes intended.
- 13** To ensure the Council maintains its improvement journey and to make the best use of resources and ensure a focus on priorities, the Council should:
- develop further its workforce planning by undertaking a comprehensive skills audit to identify and address any gaps;
 - undertake routine evaluation of all projects, initiatives and partnerships to ensure that the Council's resources make the most impact and deliver the best value for money; and
 - strengthen the scrutiny function to ensure robust and constructive challenge of performance, plans and decisions, including their direct and indirect consequences, so that priorities are delivered fully and not unintentionally undermined.
- 14** Improve external communication by:
- regularly checking that the community understands the Council's messages and information. This will help the public know what services are offered by the Council and allow the Council to highlight what it has achieved.
 - providing clear and regular information updates on progress, especially for longer term projects such as the town centre.

Summary of assessment scores

Headline questions	Theme	Score*	Weighted score
What is the Council, together with its partners trying to achieve?	Ambition	2	4
	Prioritisation	3	6
What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?	Capacity	2	4
	Performance Management	2	4
What has been achieved?	Achievement	2	14
Weighted score			32
Overall Corporate Assessment Score **			Fair
* 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 determining the overall CPA category**

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

Context

The locality

- 15** 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.
- 16** The population of the district is 92,050 and is predicted to increase by 15.3 per cent to 106,134 in 2029. The black and minority ethnic population (BME) is 3.3 per cent, which is low for the region and low nationally. The proportion of older people is expected to rise with the over 80s population estimated to increase by 123 per cent by 2029. There are 39,000 households in the district; over a quarter of these are single, older person households. An estimated 6,964 households in the district have one or more members with identified special needs (primarily physical disability or frail elderly) which is well above the national average.
- 17** The economic picture of the district has been generally very positive although, like elsewhere, is now being affected by the current economic climate. The district ranks 299th 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 but these subsequently returned to a very low level of 1.7 per cent. More recently unemployment rates have risen but still remain comparatively low - between September and December 2008 they rose from 1.8 to 2.2 per cent.
- 18** There are two major areas of economic challenge within the district: the redevelopment of the Longbridge site and Bromsgrove town centre. Bromsgrove and Birmingham Councils are working together and have prepared 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.
- 19** Eighty three per cent of households are owner occupied, the 11th highest figure in England and Wales. The average house price in 2007/08 was £237,849 which is higher than the regional or national average. The provision of sufficient affordable housing is a key challenge for the Council. For the last three years the Council has been operating a planning moratorium on new housing development with only new affordable housing developments being built. It has a target of 80 units of affordable housing a year for the next five years.

- 20** Generally, the district's population is healthier than the regional average. 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.
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The Council

- 21** 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 comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) rating of 'poor' and entered into voluntary engagement with the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). In 2006 it requested a CPA against the new 2006 framework in order to validate the improvement plan and to identify further areas of improvement. The CPA 2007 rated the Council as 'poor' but did acknowledge that the Council had made considerable progress. Engagement with DCLG has continued.
- 22** The Council has had a history of frequent changes in senior management and political leadership. A new Leader was appointed in October 2005 and the Council has a majority Conservative administration, with 26 Conservatives, 6 Labour, 5 Independents, and 2 Wythall Residents' Association. The Council operates a modernised political structure with the Leader/Cabinet model; supported by three non-executive boards - the audit board, scrutiny steering board and performance management board - as well as standards and licensing committees. It also has a corporate management team (CMT), with a new Chief Executive appointed in March 2007. Since August 2008 the Council's Chief Executive has been Acting Joint Chief Executive of Bromsgrove District Council and Redditch Borough Council.
- 23** The Council has a net revenue budget of £11.733 million (2008/09) and a government grant of £4.858 million. The Council employs 348 staff. The District Council's element of the Band D council tax for 2008/09 was £180.13 which is higher than the shire district average.
- 24** This CPA examines the progress and achievements made since the last CPA in early 2007.

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

Ambition

- 25** The Council is performing adequately in this area. Strategies and policies clearly link to county wide strategies and policies and to those of partners. It has a clear vision based on community need and aspirations informed by community consultation and engagement. External communication, whilst improved, is not always effective in ensuring messages are received and understood and feedback on decisions and results of consultation is inconsistent.
- 26** Community ambitions link well with and support county wide ambitions. The County and District Councils in Worcestershire signed a local area agreement (LAA) in 2006. The LAA committed the Council and its partners to work to deliver targeted improvements in quality of life for local people, including raising educational attainment, reducing crime and disorder, and improving public health. The Council and its partners negotiated a new LAA with the government during 2008. The new LAA covers similar areas to the previous one, but also includes targets on reducing the risks from flooding, improving access to benefits for older people, and reducing bullying in schools. Although the county wide LAA does not show explicit or specific links to Bromsgrove's ambitions and priorities, it is relevant to the needs of Bromsgrove district, for example town centre regeneration and Longbridge redevelopment. Sharing ambitions with partners helps to ensure that organisations work towards the same goals of improving local quality of life.
- 27** The Council and its partners have clear and long-term ambitions for the district over ten years and beyond. The sustainable community strategy (SCS) 2007 to 2010 'Your district your future' developed by the Council and the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) clearly links to the county wide LAA. Its vision is: 'We will make Bromsgrove District a better place to work, live and visit by driving forward change'. Five themes or values underpin the vision: excellent customer service; community leadership; equality; value for money (VfM); and partnership. The SCS has clear action plans with measurable milestones and outcomes. It was updated in October 2008, and now has a sharper focus on effective community engagement and consultation. As part of its community influence framework, the Council funded two pilot area committee schemes during 2007/08 and allocated £ 4,000 to each of the area committees. As a result local people are able to influence better what is prioritised in their local area.

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

- 28** The Council and its partners have an effective means of communicating their long-term vision. The SCS gives a narrative picture of what the district might look like in ten years' time. For example, it defines what it means in this area to have a thriving town centre; what sort of housing will be provided for the potential mix of population - older and younger, affluent and less well off; what community leadership will deliver; and how value for money and partnership will be ensured. As a result, the clarity of the vision is strong and is translated well, allowing citizens to measure success over time.
- 29** The Council's corporate plan (or 'council plan') for 2008 to 2011 has clear objectives. It provides an overarching vision and set of ambitions for the area which address identified needs. Targets are measurable and provide an appropriate framework for achieving the ambitions. For 2007/08 and for 2008/09 the priorities were regeneration; improvement; sense of community and well being; and environment. Each Council objective and priority has a reference number and these are tracked into departmental service business plans, team plans and individual personal development reviews, to create a golden thread. The three year council plan is supported each year by an annual improvement plan. The plan gives clarity to targets and objectives and enables the focus on outcomes. As a result the council plan acts as a high level map for the business of the Council in delivering its ambitions.
- 30** The Council's community leadership is developing well. It has strengthened its community engagement and consultation. For example senior officers routinely attend partners and communities together (PACT) meetings. During the last 18 months 68 PACT meetings have been held, allowing local people to discuss and prioritise their concerns at a local level. The Council funded two pilot area committee schemes or local neighbourhood partnerships (LNP) during 2007/08, and allocated £4,000 to each. During 2008/09 this has been increased to £15,000 each. A third LNP is proposed for the Hagley and Rural area. Achievements to date as a result of the LNP include improved appearance of the local area, Halloween activities for young people, and a greater degree of civic pride in the two areas.
- 31** Ambitions are based on a good understanding of community needs. The Council has an effective approach to consulting with local communities. For example it carried out a residents' survey in 2008, and ran its first children and young people's convention in 2007. It uses a community bidding approach for the equalities and diversity forum, and is running a budget jury, enabling local people to decide how delegated money should be spent. Key issues to emerge from involving the equalities and diversity forum are the regeneration of the town centre with suitable disabled access, extended hours of the shop mobility service, the need for a community transport scheme and the redevelopment of the railway station, which is currently not compliant with requirements relating to disability access. By engaging with local people the Council is better able to ensure that its priorities meet residents' needs.

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

- 32** The Council's communication with the public is adequate. It is now better at presenting the Council to the press and there are fewer disagreements between councillors within the letters pages. One of the local newspapers recently carried an article on Council success stories and the Leader writes a monthly column. However, the Council does not consistently evaluate its external communications and whether local people understand the messages. Similarly, the Council does not consistently evaluate the impact of its public consultation and engagement activity, and does not always feed back the results of consultations to those taking part. Without this final part of communication, the Council will not always know if its investments are working and the public will not be clear what difference their contribution has made.
- 33** Relations with the voluntary and community sector are much improved. Key staff members have brought their own experience of voluntary sector organisations to the Council. The Council has put in place a service level agreement to provide a small grant to the voluntary sector infrastructure organisation so they can attend the LSP and chair one of the LSP theme groups. As a result there is now an effective involvement in procurement procedures. Twenty senior staff recently spent time on volunteer work with the voluntary sector, improving understanding on both sides of each other's priorities and challenges. This activity has increased the Council's focus and understanding for working with key partners.

Prioritisation

- 34** The Council is performing well in this area. It has a sound strategic framework for planning its priorities, supported by robust business planning. It actively engages the public in identifying priorities, and has an effective approach to engaging its diverse communities and understanding their concerns. The Council is clear about what is a priority and what is not a priority, and it moves resources accordingly. It makes difficult decisions but it does not always think through and consider their impacts on overall objectives.
- 35** The Council has a sound strategic framework for delivering priorities. The strategic priorities are set out in the council plan which is a rolling three year plan, and this in turn drives the service planning process and the annual improvement plan. The Council and its partners on the LSP agreed to give particular focus between 2007 and 2010 to three priorities: Bromsgrove town centre redevelopment; Longbridge regeneration; and affordable housing. As a result the Council has clarity and focus for its work.

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

- 36** The Council has a clear set of specific and focused priorities based on customers', stakeholders' and staff's ambitions. The SCS sets the longer term context. The annual business cycle sets the appropriate priorities and these drive investment decisions. For 2007/08 these were regeneration with the priorities of town centre, Longbridge and housing; improvement and its priorities of performance, reputation and customer service; sense of community and wellbeing with the priorities of community influence and community events; and environment with its priorities of clean district and planning. As part of the budget planning process for 2008/09 the Cabinet proposed a streamlined set of five priorities against the Council's objectives to ensure the focus of resources, reflecting increased and effective consultation and engagement of both customers and staff. Consequently, for 2008/09, priorities became more specific and more focused: a thriving market town; housing; a sense of community; and street scene with sustainability. As a result the Council put resources in to providing more play spaces, CCTV funding and keeping streets clean, while reducing the number of council posts by 35. By regularly refreshing its priorities the Council ensures that it is focusing on things that matter to local people
- 37** The Council is clear about what is not a priority and it moves resources away from these areas into its priorities. Service areas that fall outside the delivery of priorities are the areas required to find the savings targets in any given year (subject to consideration of the impact any efficiencies or service cuts have on the wider workings of the Council). This approach has resulted in the movement of £1.6 million of funding in 2008/09 into customer priorities. The Council has also made some difficult decisions such as closing a museum, proposed charging for green waste, increasing car parking charges, and removing concessionary parking passes for the over 60s. However, on a few occasions, the Council has not always fully considered the consequences of these decisions. For example, it is not clear how the changes to parking charges impact on its objectives of town centre regeneration. There is a tension between raising car park charges and trying to attract people in to the town centre.
- 38** The Council actively engages with local people to plan the delivery of priorities. As part of its community engagement strategy the Council uses a variety of methods to promote engagement and inform the development and delivery of its services. Facilitated community engagement activities include an equalities and diversity forum budget bidding process and democracy workshops in local schools to promote local democracy week. In 2008 the Council ran facilitated public focus groups on the quality of life of older people in the district, customer access and customer standards, and satisfaction surveys for services such as street scene and community services. The Council also runs on-line consultations on its budget. Actions resulting from public feedback include an £850,000 investment to improve the Dolphin Centre gym facility, £175,000 investment in improving town centre toilets, and £70,000 for community transport.
- 39** The Council engages positively with black and minority ethnic groups (BME) and vulnerable groups. Input from the equalities and diversity forum has led to an effective focus on addressing some of their needs. The Council is at Level 2 of the local government Equality Standard and the Council's plans include reference to ensuring that the needs of BME and vulnerable groups are considered. 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 Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?

- 40** The Council has robust action plans for delivering its priorities. Business plans clearly state lead responsibilities, resource requirements, milestones, and targets, as well as the contributions expected from organisations, services, and staff. All business plans follow the same template and give a clear outline of links to corporate priorities and contribution to corporate objectives. Key deliverables and outputs are clearly described, as well as budget bids and savings. Key consultations are listed and planned. Customer standards and equalities action plans are included. Staff actively contribute to the development of business plans. The Council can show how its priorities are linked to resources and how its actions deliver the priorities.

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

Capacity

- 41** The Council is performing adequately in this area. Political and managerial leadership is clear and senior management and staff capacity has been enhanced. The roles and responsibilities of councillors are clearer and there is greater awareness of the ethical code. Financial management and the approach to value for money are adequate. Improvements in procurement and investment in ICT is starting to have an impact and partnership working is now more effective. The organisational culture of the Council has improved but elements of the 'old' culture remain and there is still a strong external perception that the behaviour of a small minority of councillors is damaging the reputation of the Council and has an adverse impact on its external relationships. Comprehensive workforce planning is not yet in place.
- 42** The Council is well led. The Leader and Chief Executive provide clear political and managerial leadership which is recognised by staff and partners. There is greater openness and willingness to listen and learn, leading to the Council playing a more positive role in local and regional partnerships from which it was previously absent. For example the Council is now leading a group of councils to agree a single approach to negotiating with the new Homes and Communities Agency in respect of future housing provision and expenditure. The very recent appointment of the Council's Chief Executive as Acting Joint Chief Executive of Bromsgrove and Redditch has not impacted on leadership or capacity at Bromsgrove. It is too early to see the anticipated outcomes for Bromsgrove, including those arising from proposed shared services. The Council has a greater sense of purpose and this has increased the willingness of partners to work with it.

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

- 43** Senior management and staff capacity have been enhanced, leading to greater effectiveness and focus on priorities. The Council sought help from SOLACE (Society of local authority chief executives) to strengthen and recruit to the corporate management team (CMT). An additional executive director has been recruited and CMT and the Cabinet have worked together on two Top Team programmes run by the IDeA (Improvement and development agency). The appointment of an operational development manager, use of a £200,000 corporate training budget and a managers' training programme have all led to improved customer focus and service delivery. For example all officers, including frontline staff such as those carrying out waste collections, have received Customer First training leading to an improved quality of service and fewer complaints.
- 44** The Council has invested effectively in strengthening councillor capacity. All councillors have had induction training and it is now mandatory for councillors sitting on planning, scrutiny, and audit committees to attend more specific training relevant to their responsibilities. The Leader and some portfolio holders have undertaken IDeA leadership training or been supported by external mentors. The Council has a greater business focus resulting from the recent election of councillors with relevant expertise. Roles and responsibilities have been made clearer through a review of the Council's constitution and scheme of delegation, leading to a greater political focus on strategic and policy decisions rather than operational detail. There is a greater level of trust between councillors and officers, with regular meetings between portfolio holders and officers. The strengthened councillor capacity has led to a greater focus on addressing previous weaknesses and improving services.
- 45** Behaviours are generally positive and constructive, but there remains a concern about the damaging behaviours of a small minority of councillors. Councillors have a greater awareness of responsibilities set out by the ethical governance framework - all councillors have been trained on their ethical responsibilities, and the recommendations of an independent review undertaken in 2007 by the IDeA have been implemented. The standards committee is chaired by an independent councillor and is now actively tackling breaches of the ethical code - for example a councillor was recently suspended for not declaring their interests. Whilst there is more constructive political debate, there remains a strong external perception that a small minority of councillors behave in a disruptive or confrontational manner. This does not help the Council change and improve its external reputation and undermines work with partners and external organisations.

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

- 46** Financial management is now adequate. A three year medium-term financial plan is in place which includes revenue and capital budget requirements up until 2011/12. It includes allocations for priorities and identifies areas for disinvestment - some of which relate to councillor development (£8,000) and corporate training (£50,000 representing 25 per cent of original budget)) in 2009/10 which could undermine further improvements in officer and staff capacity although the Council expects less training will be needed in the future. Financial savings are based, as in the previous year, on more efficient working practices and alternative methods of service delivery (estimated to save £131,000 in 2009/10) which are at the early stages of exploration but include some restructuring and deletion of posts. Shared services are being actively explored with Redditch - for example electoral services. Some savings have already been secured through the joint chief executive arrangement and provision of procurement services for Redditch and Wychavon Councils. Plans for the longer term are not in place and there is no systematic approach to securing external funding - although due to its low overall deprivation level the Council is excluded from bidding for many sources of money. Sound financial management is necessary if the Council is to address its priorities and the needs of the community.
- 47** The approach to securing value for money is adequate. A sound framework is now in place providing a greater focus on value for money although improvement in delivery of value for money is not yet evident. Costs are at or above average whilst performance, albeit improved, remains below average. Performance and cost reporting are integrated. A revised value for money strategy and action plan was adopted in 2008 and the Council has undertaken reviews of some services to identify ways to secure improvements. For example, a review of waste collection where costs are high found that the cost of operating and maintaining the vehicles was significantly higher than in other councils. This was due to the Council's vehicles being different to those used by all other councils in the country thereby increasing the costs of servicing and parts. As a result of the review the Council is now investigating replacement vehicles. By strengthening its approach to value for money the Council is better placed to ensure resources are used effectively and efficiently.
- 48** A sound approach to procurement is now in place and some savings delivered. The new procurement strategy 2008/11 seeks to balance risk, cost and environmental considerations using nine criteria to appraise options, and the Council is involved in the West Midlands Centre of Excellence. Savings delivered include those from agency contracting, stationary and graphics design. However, the strategy indicates that a number of challenges remain including the need for training, a review of suppliers and the elimination of inconsistent purchasing practices across the Council. Effective procurement ensures money spent delivers services and goods that meet the needs of the community.

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

- 49** Investment in ICT and implementation of the Spatial Project is beginning to enhance capacity. Use of ICT is starting to enhance customer service and capacity although the level of benefits arising from the business spatial project (an ICT rationalisation programme) still remains unclear. The Council has invested £4.2 million in the spatial project and infrastructure. Phase one of the project has been implemented with eleven new software packages which will integrate and eventually link to the customer services centre. Whilst the speed and quality of customer service have improved, it is not always clear what improvements users and the Council can expect from the project. For example, the spatial project business plan makes general reference to 'providing a system that is flexible to citizen requirements' and 'being at the forefront of service delivery' but there are no specific outcomes included that can be measured against to ensure delivery.
- 50** Effective partnership working is adding to capacity. In the past partnership working was ineffective and others have been reluctant to work with the Council but this has now changed. Streamlining the services offered to clients in partnership with Bromsgrove and District CAB and Bromsgrove District Housing Trust (BDHT) has delivered improved outcomes for people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness. Work with Bromsgrove Youth Homeless Forum to extend the specialist support and preventative services available to young people aged 16 to 25 has resulted in Bromsgrove being recognised by the Government as the West Midlands regional centre of excellence for youth homelessness. Partnership working is now helping the council meet the needs of the community.
- 51** The culture of the organisation has moved from being bureaucratic and silo based towards being more proactive and 'can do' although pockets of the old culture still remain below the heads of service level. Capacity and morale are, however, being adversely affected by single status and job evaluation which still remain unresolved. The Council has lost a number of experienced officers, for example in planning and benefits, and it has found it difficult to appoint replacements leading to a decline in some services such as benefits. The Council is aware that delays in resolving single status, which has been partly caused by external events nationally including a recent court case, are impacting on capacity and morale. It agreed to a 90 day consultation process to achieve an agreement with the unions or to dismiss and reappoint so as to bring the matter to a close. The improved organisational culture is helping to improve the image, reputation and quality of service provided although this has been limited by a lack of progress to resolve single status and job evaluation.

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

- 52** Comprehensive workforce planning is not in place. The Council has not carried out a full skills audit so it does not know what skills it has available and what are currently needed. New disciplinary, anti-bullying and capability processes are in place as is sickness monitoring but sickness absence continues to be a challenge - it is higher than the national average with levels recently rising and is adversely affecting some services such as benefits. Capacity in some areas, such as the customer service centre, appears fragile - holidays and sickness are reported to have adversely impacted on performance. However, Investors in People accreditation has been secured and personal development reviews (PDRs) are undertaken for all staff and the people strategy supports staff development - for example in management techniques. A comprehensive understanding of the skills available and required, supported by effective training and development, enable an organisation to know that it has the workforce it needs to deliver its objectives.

Performance management

- 53** The Council is performing adequately in this area. A robust performance management framework is in place which has led to some service improvements. The Council's strategic partnerships are managing performance effectively. Risks are considered and reported, although the action taken to manage them is not always adequately evaluated. Whilst the performance management framework is sound, the Council does not consistently focus on outcomes, nor does it actively learn from customer complaints. Scrutiny is not effectively challenging performance and holding the executive to account, which will be key to sustaining improvement in future.
- 54** A good performance management framework is now in place and this had led to improvements in service delivery. During engagement with DCLG there has been a strong focus on performance management and the establishment of a performance champions group and data quality and performance management strategies have led to improvements. There is regular performance monitoring and reporting of progress against the sustainable community strategy, council plan, MTFP, improvement plan and service plans. Reports are clear and focused and include integrated financial and performance reporting leading to the allocation of resources to priorities such as affordable housing and customer services which has led to some improved service delivery and performance. There are monthly meetings between the portfolio holders and heads of service. Challenge is provided by the corporate management team and the performance management board. A sound staff appraisal system is in place. However the importance of performance management is not fully understood and accepted at all levels of the Council. For example, minutes of the performance champions group (a group of middle managers) indicate some problems with the submission and quality of monthly performance data suggesting that not all managers accept the importance of robust performance management. Reporting of performance linked to specific sections of the community, for example BME and other communities at risk of disadvantage, is not being undertaken.

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

- 55** Effective performance management is in place for major partnerships but is less effective for some other forms of partnership working. The LSP and crime and disorder reduction partnership (CDRP) have effective performance management arrangements in place, allowing the Council and other partners to identify progress. However where the Council has worked with smaller organisations robust performance management arrangements are not in place. For example the Council provides £120,000 per year to the Artrix Centre but there is no service level agreement in place to ensure that the Council's money is being used to deliver identified outcomes. Without effective performance arrangements in place the Council cannot be sure that its resources are being used to deliver outcomes that the public would recognise.
- 56** The Council is not consistently focused on outcomes. Whilst there is a sound framework of strategies in place, the Council's focus to date has been largely on outputs rather than on outcomes that residents would notice. Outcomes are about what the Council is trying to achieve for local residents, which local residents will recognise and which can be measured. Following the findings of the previous CPA much of the Council's focus has been to embed plans and processes. Reporting of achievements relating to priorities is not always clear since it tends to focus on actions taken rather than outcomes the public would notice. SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, resourced and time bound) measures and outcomes are not consistently in place. For example targets in service plans are often generalised, with a lack of context in terms of comparative performance so that it is unclear what level of improvement is being sought and whether it is challenging. Many of these targets do not propose any improvement. Other actions have targets identified for 2011 but with no intermediate targets allowing progress to be checked and action taken to ensure delivery, for example in the street scene and waste management service plan. As a result the Council cannot always be sure whether it is achieving its intended outcomes for local people.
- 57** Scrutiny is not yet effective. The scrutiny steering board is chaired by an independent councillor and has undertaken a number of task group reviews such as anti social behaviour, air quality and public transport. However whilst there has been debate, there has been no clear focus on the Council's priorities and what the Council can do. Scrutiny is not adequately challenging the executive. The role of councillors in challenging performance and decisions is still underdeveloped which risks undermining a sustained focus on performance and improvement once DCLG disengages. In the past year it did not call in any decisions nor did it consider or review potentially contentious decisions such as the proposed introduction of charges for green waste collections to identify the consequential impacts of such a decision. The Council has recognised that the scrutiny function has not been effective and in October 2008 it created separate overview and scrutiny boards to examine future and recent decisions respectively but it is too early to see any impact of this. Unless the Council ensures constructive internal challenge it cannot be sure that it is achieving its intended outcomes.

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

- 58** Risks are routinely considered and reported although actions to ensure minimisation of risks are less clear. The corporate risk register is updated quarterly and reported to corporate risk management board, steering board and audit board. Each service has its own risk register. Whilst the corporate risk register identifies 12 (out of 18) key objectives rated as red (high) risk it is less clear how they are to be actively reduced. Most of the key controls cited in the corporate risk register refer to putting strategies or processes in place with no further actions to check that they reduce the risk. However the Council is actively managing the risks associated with the acting joint chief executive appointment - for example through increasing senior management capacity. Unless the Council evaluates the effectiveness of its actions it cannot always be sure that risks are being minimised.
- 59** The Council is not systematically analysing and learning from complaints. Complaints are monitored and reported but there is an absence of systematic analysis and actions taken to improve. A complaints and customer feedback system was introduced in January 2008 and customer satisfaction data is collected regularly through surveys and the customer panel. Complaint figures are supplied monthly to the corporate management team and Cabinet with an annual trend analysis. However, there is limited analysis of the types and frequency of complaints to ensure action is taken to prevent future reoccurrence. Without the systematic analysis of all complaints and actions the Council may miss opportunities to take action to improve service delivery.
- 60** Evaluation of major projects and initiatives is effective but there is no routine evaluation of smaller projects or initiatives. The programme management board considers project documentation and delivery against timescales. For example, a joint County Council/District Council project board for the town centre has been established and a town centre project manager now coordinates activities to ensure progress. However, to date, not all smaller or one off projects and initiatives have been routinely evaluated to ensure that stated outcomes have actually been delivered and that resources are directed to where they make the most impact.
- 61** The Council is learning from others to improve itself. The performance management system was developed from learning from Rotherham and Derby Councils. The town centre redevelopment has been informed by the experiences of Warwickshire County Council and Bracknell Forest Council. However, the Council is not maximising opportunities to learn - for example cost benchmarking and use of mystery shopping by all services are not being used to aid improvement. As a result the Council is missing opportunities which would help it improve further.

What has been achieved?

- 62** The Council is performing adequately in this area.
- 63** There has been notable improvement in performance but this has, in many instances, been from a very low base and overall performance remains below that of other councils. Audited PI data for 2007/08 shows that between 2006/07 and 2007/08, 79 per cent of PIs improved. The Council has 25 per cent of PIs in the best 25 per cent in the country which is below the district council average of 33 per cent. More recent unaudited data provided by the Council indicates that performance in many areas has been maintained or continued to improve. In October 2008 74 per cent of PIs were stable or improving.
- 64** Customer satisfaction remains low although it has improved. The 2006/07 data shows overall satisfaction with the Council and satisfaction with complaint handling is below average and improved only slightly since the last survey in 2003/04. Other satisfaction levels remain low. More recent unaudited data from the Council indicates some satisfaction levels, such as street cleanliness and recycling facilities, have risen.
- 65** Out of necessity there has been much focus on implementing the improvement plan and putting in place internal processes and plans which were absent at the time of the previous CPA. Many of these improvements and 'building blocks' have yet to deliver outcomes the public would recognise. Also, some of the priorities such as the town centre and Longbridge will take many years to deliver, although the plans for Longbridge are further advanced.

Achievement - Objective One: Regeneration with a thriving market town and housing as its priorities.

- 66** Plans to regenerate the town centre are at an early stage and there are few outcomes that the public would recognise. Most of the focus to date has been on developing an area action plan and an issues and options paper is currently out to consultation. A joint County and District Council Project Board has been established for the town centre and a town centre project manager appointed. Negotiations to relocate the various emergency services to a new site thus freeing up sites in the town centre are underway. County Council funding for asset investment and an accessibility study to reduce traffic and increase footfall has been secured. The shop mobility scheme opening hours have been extended and the building of a new toilet block with a high dependency unit for people with disabilities is imminent. However, a recent decision to increase car parking charges appears, from comments received from a range of local stakeholders, to be driving people away from the town, especially in the evening. It appears that the decision was based on the need to increase income with the consequential impact on the town centre not taken fully into account. Plans to regenerate Longbridge are progressing well - an area action plan has been prepared in association with Birmingham City and the County Council but again it is too early to see redevelopment of the site.

- 67** The Council's strategic housing service has improved. A re-inspection undertaken in 2008 scored the service as 'fair' with 'promising prospects for improvement'. District-wide housing needs data has recently been updated which will inform future housing and planning policies. The Longbridge area action plan already contains a provision for 35 per cent of the proposed 1,450 new homes to be affordable. The Council is seeking to increase its current proposed regional strategic housing allocation, which it believes will not help Bromsgrove, by engaging with the West Midlands Regional Assembly and Government Office West Midlands. However, until this matter is resolved the Council is not in a position to lift the moratorium on new housing development which is limiting the delivery of affordable housing.
- 68** The Council is pursuing effectively a variety of initiatives to secure future housing provision to meet local needs. The supply of affordable housing has increased (96 units in 2007/08) but the gap between supply and demand remains. The Council is using its own resources to assist the delivery of affordable housing - it has discounted or gifted land to support housing development and provides £350,000 per year to grant fund BDHT. Local housing needs surveys have led to the provision of rural affordable housing schemes such as the 15 units in Belbroughton. It is also investigating options to purchase new flats which are not selling in the current economic climate.
- 69** The housing needs of the more vulnerable sections of the community are being addressed successfully. Victims of domestic violence now have increased access to housing through joint working with the supporting people team. This has led to the planned closure of the refuge and the provision of five units of self-contained accommodation, with an extended floating support service to increase service provision. This is supplemented by a sanctuary scheme. The Council has invested £1 million in the provision of extra care units - an additional 27 units are currently being built in Charford.

Achievement - Objective Two: Improvement with customer service being a priority

- 70** Customer service improved with the opening of the customer service centre (CSC), part of the Worcestershire wide 'hub' which is operated jointly by the Council and Worcestershire County Council. Data provided by the Council for August 2008 indicates that the average call waiting time has fallen from 55 to 22 seconds between August 2007 and 2008. The percentage of failed calls has reduced from 33 to 6 per cent. Resolution of enquiries at first point of contact is high (98 per cent) but this excludes any call that needs to be transferred and the CSC does not deal with some specific service enquiries, such as planning, which are still directed to the individual service. A recent customer survey showed that 71 per cent of people found accessing the Customer Service Centre easy.
- 71** Use of ICT has also improved the customer experience. The Council's website has been updated and now allows some transactions to be carried out electronically. For example, reporting of issues such as fly-tipping, online payments of council tax and excess payments, and the submission of planning applications. However some tasks still require the downloading of forms which need to be printed and then submitted - for example car parking season tickets.

What has been achieved?

- 72** Customer focus is not embedded throughout the Council. All officers have attended 'Customer First' courses but the Council has recognised it still needs to improve the back office responsiveness to customers; enhance electronic service delivery and move from the professional or practitioner focus to a customer culture. Customer service standards are in place. There are corporate standards relating to response times for letters, emails and voice mail and service standards for various activities although some key ones, for example the time to approve planning conditions, are not included. The service standards are new and it is unclear if they are monitored and where they are reported. Anecdotal evidence from users suggests that the level of service is variable and is occasionally poor. Customer, resident and partner benefits from the spatial project are not yet evident or explicitly stated so as to ensure delivery.
- 73** The specific needs of customers are not being met consistently by all services. The Council has just started taking its benefits service out to various locations in the borough and the waste collection service offers assisted collections to those who require help. It has increased engagement with the local community to inform service delivery and plans. The partners and communities together (PACT) neighbourhood meetings, and the disabled user group and the equalities forum have been used to inform the town centre plans and led to an increase in shop mobility opening hours and the proposed new toilets. An outreach worker works with people with disabilities to find out their needs, and 22 centres for reporting hate crime have been set up across the district. However, the time taken to process benefit claims continues to increase which adversely impacts on a vulnerable section of the community.
- 74** External communication about the services offered is not consistently effective. The Council undertakes a range of initiatives to advertise services and events but many stakeholders and residents remain unaware of the services now offered by the Council, for example the text messaging service and community events being held in the area. This means that the community is not able to access or fully benefit from services provided.

Achievement - Objective Three: Sense of community and well being, with sense of community being a priority

- 75** Improved working with partners and the community is enhancing the sense of wellbeing. The Council's 2008 quality of life survey indicates that 64 per cent of residents felt Bromsgrove was a nice place to live with only 10 per cent reporting they felt they did not belong to their local area.
- 76** The crime and disorder reduction partnership (CDRP) is effective and this has led to reductions in crime levels in the borough. Despite this, concerns about fear of crime remain - the 2007/08 crime data for the whole of the West Mercia Police area indicates that the fear of crime is increasing for most indicators although the level is still lower than the regional or national figures. The Council with the police have undertaken a number of initiatives to address this. The Council has provided funding for CCTV in the town centre leading to a drop in car crime. Alcohol free zones in areas such as Alvechurch and Rubery and use of high visibility policing, community wardens and police community support officers have led to a decrease in crime in areas such as Waseley. The Council is currently seeking to increase the powers of wardens and community support officers so that they can issue fixed penalty notices.

- 77** Better working with the voluntary sector and other partners is starting to enhance the capacity of the Council to improve the health of the community. Work with the PCT (Primary Care Trust) has improved, leading to recognition by the Council that health and wellbeing are issues that the Council needs to tackle. The Council and its partners have secured external funding to set up a number of initiatives including a sports network. The voluntary sector reported that the Council is now more willing to listen and engage with it; 17 officers have spent time with the voluntary sector to learn from it. In 2008, for the first time, the Council has given funding to support three voluntary organisations.
- 78** The Council is addressing the needs of young people well. Through working with young people a number of initiatives have been undertaken to meet their needs, including diversionary activities which have also led to decreases in anti social behaviour. For example money from the Worcestershire County Council's children's fund has been used to provide multi-use games areas (MUGA) in Charford and Sidemoor. Use of developer contributions from new developments has also been used to refurbish and update play provision including the provision of skate board ramps. The range of sporting activities available and participation rates have increased.
- 79** Limited action has been taken to address the needs of older people. The borough has a significant and increasing elderly population and whilst older people may have participated in the range of Council run community engagement activities, work specifically focused on meeting the needs of this group is more limited. Actions include running mobility classes and the introduction of free swimming. The Council funds and has a service level agreement with the Bromsgrove and Redditch Network (BARN), a local voluntary sector infrastructure organisation which is part of the LSP and chairs the Older Persons Theme Group. It plans to use the LSP's Older People Project Group to provide a dialogue with older people, to feed their information into the Council and to provide a mechanism for departments to consult with older people. The Council is also working with the voluntary sector to improve community transport but outcomes that meet this sector of the population's needs are not evident. Consideration is being given to undertaking a scrutiny exercise relating to older people which could help raise awareness this sectors needs to inform and improve future service delivery.

What has been achieved?

Achievement - Objective Four: Environment, with clean streets and the recycling being a priority

- 80** The audited 2007/08 PIs show that 70 per cent of environment-related indicators improved since 2006/07 but the Council has only 14 per cent of such PIs in the best 25 per cent in the country which is below the district average of 35 per cent. The Council has improved cleanliness and sustained consistently high rates of recycling. The Council exceeded its statutory recycling and composting target of 20 per cent by recycling or composting 43 per cent of household waste. However, the overall amount of household waste collected per person remains relatively high (430 kg per head compared to 374 kg for the best performers) as do collection costs (£70.66 per household compared to £44.52 for the best performers). The Council operates a fortnightly waste collection and a green waste collection although the latter will cease being a free service early next year. 2007/08 PIs indicate 94 per cent of the population is served by kerbside recycling which is in the bottom 25 per cent in the country. Four new bring banks have been opened including the ability to recycle tetra packs. Action is being taken to raise the awareness of recycling. Initiatives include waste stop shops providing information; visits to ten schools by the 'Recycler'- a hip hop rapping robot to promote the three Rs of recycling; and visits to villages by the recycling bus. The Council's 2008 quality of life survey indicated that 81 per cent of residents use the Council's recycling facilities and 84 per cent are satisfied with the recycling service.
- 81** Street cleanliness has improved. The 2007/08 PIs indicate 11 per cent of land was littered and 5 per cent of land had unacceptable levels of visible graffiti - both below average. Action taken includes the introduction of 'hit squads', investment in new equipment; work with the probation service to clear alleys in Rubery and changes to grass cutting and litter picking practices. 2006/07 PIs show satisfaction has improved but remains in the bottom 25 per cent in the country. The Council's customer panel data indicates that satisfaction has since risen.
- 82** The Council is starting to consider its own environmental impacts and carbon emissions, although it is too early to see the impact. The Council is a signatory of the Nottingham Agreement and Worcestershire Climate Pledge and the Local Strategic Partnership's Better Environment Group has a number of projects underway aiming to reduce the area's carbon footprint, help conserve and enhance biodiversity and reduce pollution. The Council funds and works with the Worcestershire Energy Efficiency Advice Centre and it provides grants for vulnerable people to insulate their homes. In addition, the Council's website provides advice on saving energy. It is too early to see the impact of such actions and the Council recognises it still has much to do to meet the LAA targets, in particular flood alleviation and carbon emissions, and it is preparing a carbon reduction strategy.

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 10 to 14 November 2008
- 4 This report has been discussed with the Council, which has been given the opportunity to examine the Audit Commission's assessment. This report will be used as the basis for improvement planning by the Council.

The Audit Commission

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