

Environment Inspection - Planning Services

Suffolk Coastal District Council

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Service Inspection

This inspection has been carried out by the Audit Commission under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999 and is in line with the Audit Commission's strategic regulation principles. These principles embody the objectives of our Strategic Plan and Strategic Regulation. They also reflect the principles from *'The Government's Policy on Inspection of Public Services'* (July 2003).

Audit Commission service inspections should:

- focus on public service outcomes from a user perspective;
- act as a catalyst to help inspected bodies improve their performance;
- concentrate inspection work where it will have most impact, so that it is proportionate and based on an assessment of risk;
- be based on a rigorous assessment of costs and benefits, with a concern for achieving value for money both by the inspected organisation and within the inspection regime itself;
- be, and be seen to be, independent of the inspected organisation;
- report in public, using impartial evidence to inform the public about the performance of public services so as to enhance accountability;
- involve collaborative working with other inspectorates and external review agencies to achieve greater co-ordination and a more holistic approach to the assessment of performance by audited and inspected bodies;
- share learning to create a common understanding of performance that encourages rigorous self-assessment and better understanding of their performance by inspected organisations;
- be carried out objectively by skilled and experienced people to high standards and using relevant evidence, transparent criteria, and open review processes; and
- enable continuous learning so that inspections can become increasingly effective and efficient.

We assess services using published key lines of enquiry (KLOEs) to inform our judgements. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk.

This report is issued in accordance with the Audit Commission's duty under section 13 of the 1999 Act.

Summary

- 1 The Council provides a 'two-star' good planning service. The service has been improving well in key areas since the last inspection three years ago and has promising prospects of improving further in order to become an excellent service.
- 2 The service has fulfilled its objective of delivering its recovery plan following designation by the government as a poorly performing, planning standards authority in 2004. This has ensured the central function of the development control team, that is, determining planning applications according to government timescales, is now working well.
- 3 However, the service has moved forwards in other ways too. Managers and lead councillors have fundamentally reviewed how the service is delivered, and have put in place a much improved team and management structure that is delivering more accessible services to customers and better use of managers, professional and support officers, and this is resulting in better efficiency. The service is now a good value-for-money service.
- 4 The service continues to provide good outcomes that meet public and government expectations in relation to housing, employment infrastructure and recreation while preserving and enhancing the environment in the district. The service ensures quality is achieved in development that results from the planning process and in the decision-making process itself.
- 5 The service communicates well with the public and makes good use of traditional means of communication but needs to improve some areas. Complaints are dealt with well and service change results. The service communicates well on environmental enhancement schemes and has made efforts to address some minority group needs such as travellers in the preparation of planning policy. However, the service is not good at listening to its customers as a matter of routine and it does not design improvements that are shaped by customers' needs and expectations. Non-traditional modes of communication such as via web-based services and email to enhance services available require further improvement.
- 6 Improvement progress has been variable in some aspects of the service, such as developing the framework for negotiating S106 agreements, and enforcement. These remain weaker aspects of the service.
- 7 The Council's planning service has promising prospects for improvement. The service is now seen by the Council as a critical service in delivering many of the goals the Council has set itself. Councillors and managers support the service strongly, and have a clear understanding of what needs to be done to make the service more effective, and there are clear plans for how sustaining and improving service levels will be resourced.

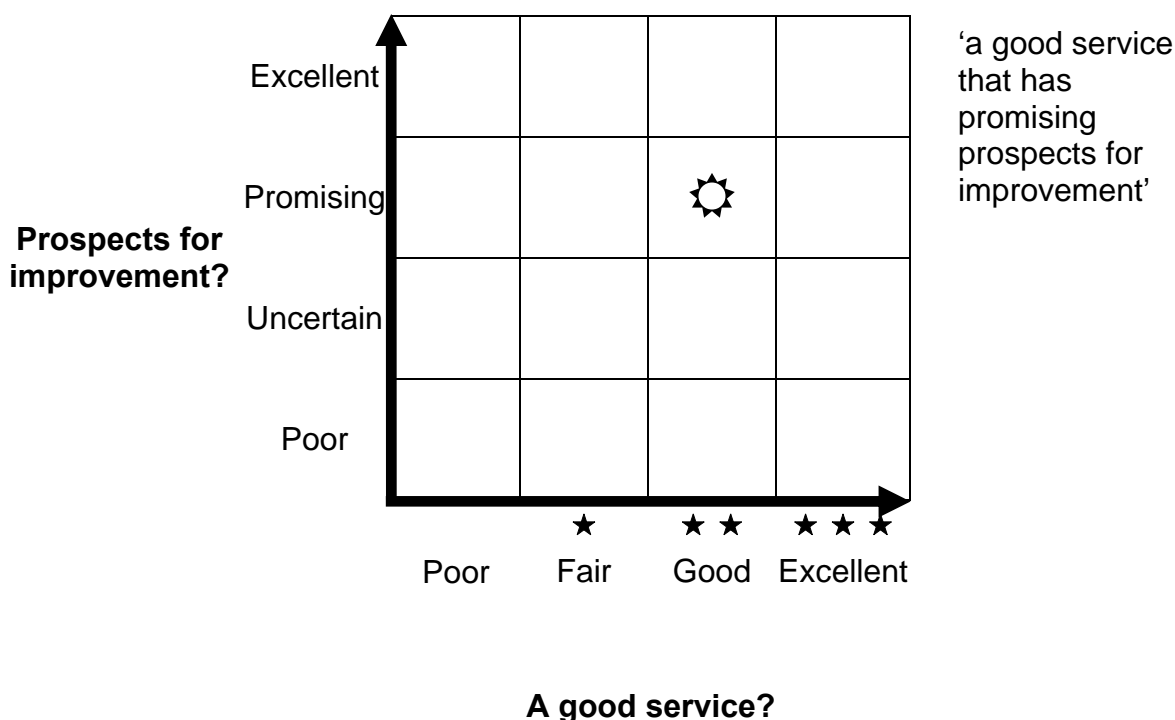
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- 8 The service works well with others across the Council to ensure the best use of expertise within specialist teams is applied in development control, enforcement and planning policy-making. Officers and councillors are effectively investing in external partnerships in order to develop the capacity to deliver the Council's wider ambitions.
- 9 While the service is clear about what needs improving, plans in some areas such as developing the service's customer focus and better use of technology are not yet fully developed, but work is in progress.

Scoring the service

- 10 We have assessed Suffolk Coastal District Council as providing a 'good' two-star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

- 11 The service is a good, two-star service because:
- access to the service via traditional methods such as face-to-face, by telephone and in writing is effective;
 - the range of planning-related advice on offer to service users is good, and relates well to what the Council and the local community view as important;
 - the service is mostly effective in consulting, and engaging with the community when formulating policy and dealing with planning applications;

¹ The scoring chart displays performance in two dimensions. The horizontal axis shows how good the service or function is now, on a scale ranging from no stars for a service that is poor (at the left-hand end) to three stars for an excellent service (right-hand end). The vertical axis shows the improvement prospects of the service, also on a four-point scale.

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- the Council has an up-to-date local plan and the planning policy team is making adequate progress in its replacement working within the district and with partners across the Haven Gateway;
- enforcement priorities have been set and are in the public domain to inform customers;
- key aspects of the service are now robust such as determining quickly all types of planning applications over the last eighteen months from a low base three years ago;
- the Council has used Section 106 agreements effectively to secure community benefits;
- planning teams with colleagues across the Council are routinely delivering good outcomes for local people in relation to housing, employment infrastructure and recreation while preserving and enhancing the environment in the district; and
- the service provides good value for money as it is a low cost service in relation to the quality of service and outcomes it delivers.

12 However:

- service standards are in place for only most of the service and need to be used more effectively to inform and meet customers' expectations;
- the planning service does not maximise its ongoing dialogue with service users and other stakeholders and so its improvement agenda is not adequately influenced by customers and it has limited feedback on the levels of satisfaction with the service;
- access to the service via electronic means such as by email and through web-based services is developing slowly and has limitations; and
- frameworks for handling S106 agreements and enforcement are still developing.

13 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- it is able to focus on priorities for improvement in the service and sustain effort over time. As a result, there is a good track record in delivering improvement in applications' handling speeds, appeals and brownfield development;
- political, professional and managerial leadership of the service is good enabling improvement to take place and enabling the role of the planning service to evolve and meet wider corporate objectives;
- effective performance management arrangements ensure managers' and councillors' vision for the service is translated into service, team, and individual actions;
- investment in the service is strong but this is also accompanied by good progress in reviewing and reorganising the way the service is delivered to ensure resources are used efficiently and effectively;

- the service makes good use of internal partners to enhance the quality of outcomes, and of external partnerships to work towards wider corporate and community goals; and
- managers have improved the capacity of the planning services' teams through effective recruitment and retention measures and through streamlining management structures.

14 However:

- while improvement effort in the service has been successful, this effort has been narrowly focused. Commitment is now strong to implement wider ranging improvement for example in relation to the customer focus of the service;
- there remain areas where performance management is not effective, such as in overseeing the delivery of customer service standards;
- plans are still being developed to deliver more effective and efficient use of ICT within the service; and
- several key corporate strategies are yet to deliver improvements at service level such as access to services, workforce development and diversity.

Recommendations

- 15 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, councils need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the Council. In addition we identify the approximate costs² and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context the inspection team recommends that the Council should do the following.

Recommendation

R1 Further develop the use of standards within the service:

- *further develop standards across the wide range of planning services available to the service users, including the pre-application advice service for householders and developers;*
- *publicise service standards and report on service performance in a way that is accessible to the public;*
- *involve service users and stakeholders in the specification of standards; and*
- *ensure management information enables the efficient monitoring and managing of performance in relation to standards.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- to clarify customers' expectations of what service levels are provided;
- to improve equity of access to planning services; and
- to improve customer satisfaction.

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs. This should be implemented by December 2007.

² Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 per cent and high cost is over 5 per cent.

Recommendation

R2 Improve the customer focus of the planning service by:

- *maximise the existing arrangements for engaging key stakeholders such as parish councils, and agents and developers, and other service users in order to shape service improvements; and*
- *ensuring customers' satisfaction with the service is evaluated, for example, in relation to aspects of the service that are frequently experienced by the public, such as the development control committee or planning reception as well as specific improvements put in place.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- to ensure improvements are what customers want and need;
- to provide more effective service delivery for customers and the Council; and
- to improve customer satisfaction in planning services provided.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by March 2008.

Recommendation

R3 Continue to improve the service's use of information and communications technology (ICT) within the framework of the Council's Access to Services strategy by:

- *promoting and supporting the use of different means of accessing the service (eg email, and web services);*
- *developing robust plans for customer-facing improvements such as web enabled services and ensuring these are informed by the needs of service users; and*
- *developing clear plans to enhance internal working arrangements through the use of ICT, such as the universal use of service-wide databases.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- to provide more efficient and effective service delivery for customers;
- to provide wider access to services that meets the needs of more customers; and
- to ensure better use of the capacity and expertise of officers across the Council.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by September 2008.

Recommendation

R4 Ensure senior officers and executive councillors maintain a strategic overview of progress in relation to the delivery of key improvement plans within planning services, in particular for:

- *developing clear arrangements for securing Section 106 agreements;*
- *continuing to explore the procurement of planning-related services in partnership with other organisations;*
- *implementing the equalities strategy within the service;*
- *delivering the Council's ambitions relating to green issues; and*
- *the planning enforcement service.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- to ensure intentions lead to action; and
- to address areas where improved performance is a service or corporate priority in order to deliver the ambition of the Council.

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs. This should be implemented by March 2008.

Report

Context

The locality

- 16 Suffolk Coastal District Council is a district council in the east of England. The district is a predominantly rural area where 90 per cent of the 42 wards in the district are classified as rural. The district is relatively large covering over 340 square miles. There are, however, significant urban and industrial areas at Felixstowe in the south of the district. There are in addition five market towns: Woodbridge, Saxmundham, Leiston, Aldeburgh and Framlingham. There are 117 parish and town councils in the district.
- 17 The population of the district is 119,800 which is a relatively large population compared to other districts in England. The population has grown by more than 20 per cent in the past two decades and is projected grow at a similar rate over the next two decades. The proportion of the district's population that is aged 45 or over is above the national average, but there are far fewer young adults (20 to 35) in the area compared to other districts. The Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) population in the district is 4.2 per cent of the total population (2001 Census). This is made up of 2.4 per cent of the population who are White, but not White British such as migrants from the European Union, and a further 1.9 per cent who could be considered as a visible Non-White population.
- 18 Property prices are above the national average but below the regional average and are the third highest out of the seven Suffolk districts. The district has a high level of owner occupation. Some settlements also have a relatively high proportion (above 25 per cent) of dwellings that are second homes. The district has a lower than regional and national average percentage unemployed people based on claimant count, and the latest median earnings figure for residents (gross weekly pay, full-time workers) is £481.20, which is above regional and national figures.
- 19 There is a low level of deprivation in the district. On the index of multiple deprivation for all districts, Suffolk Coastal ranks 286 of 354 local authorities in England, although there are pockets of deprivation that fall into the bottom 25 per cent nationally, in Felixstowe and Leiston. Educational attainment at levels 4 and 5 is higher than the regional or national average. The district has a relatively low level of crime and residents of the district feel safe.
- 20 The district has a rich environmental heritage including 37 per cent of the district designated as the coasts and heaths areas of outstanding natural beauty, 2,500 listed buildings, and nature conservation sites of international as well as national importance. These are important factors the Council has to take into account with planning and are indicative of the importance of the wider environmental agenda. There are 33 conservation areas designated in the district.

The Council

- 21 The Council comprises 55 councillors. The conservative group has overall control with 45 seats and there are 9 liberal democrat and 1 labour councillors. Currently, a leader and cabinet of 9 councillors govern the business of the Council.
- 22 The Council employs 295 staff in total, with 263 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff across all services and its overall budget for 2007/08 is £14.4 million. Council tax (average band D equivalent) and net revenue expenditure figures for the Council are relatively low compared of geographic neighbours, near neighbours (with similar characteristics) and all England averages.
- 23 The management structure of the Council has a chief executive, two strategic directors, and seven heads of service, including a head of planning services appointed in November 2005. The Council has a number of strategic service delivery partnerships. Most of the key environmental services, like refuse collection, are provided by Suffolk Coastal Services, a company independent of the Council, through a delegation agreement with Norfolk County Council. Internal audit and building control services are run on a shared basis with a neighbouring council and the Council's leisure centres with its IT services are run by external providers.
- 24 The Council is one of eight councils involved in the Haven Gateway Partnership. The Haven Gateway spans parts of Suffolk and Essex, including much of the Suffolk Coastal district. The Haven Gateway is anticipated to provide up to 50,000 new homes and jobs in the period up to 2021. This requires the eight councils as the local planning authorities to work collaboratively across the sub-region in determining the scale and location of growth, and how related infrastructure needs will be met. This will be done initially through each council's plan making function and eventually through the development control teams of each council. This work presents both a challenge for and an opportunity to Suffolk Coastal District Council as the planning service has only limited experience of this scale of working.
- 25 The Audit Commission assessed the overall services of the District as 'fair' as part of the comprehensive performance assessment of the Council which took place in 2004. The public space element of the CPA assessment looked at the how well the Council contributes to the management of the physical environment of the district, and concluded that there was a low risk of service failure and/or poor outcomes.
- 26 The Council transferred its housing stock in 1991 to Suffolk Heritage Housing Association. It was the 16th council nationally to transfer its housing stock.

The Council's planning service

- 27 The service under review consists of:
 - development control;
 - planning enforcement; and
 - planning policy including conservation.

- 28 The inspection did not include specific examination of:
- building control;
 - community planning;
 - regeneration; and
 - strategic housing.
- 29 However, the inspection considered how the planning service works alongside these services, and with other services such as leisure and recreation, and customer services, as the planning service either enables these services or is supported by them.
- 30 The expenditure (based on original budget) for the service in 2007/08 is £1.81 million, a decrease of 7.5 per cent on estimated spend in 2006/07. The Council has received a total of £1.18 million in planning delivery grant (PDG)³ to date in the five years of the regime.
- 31 The service under review employs 34.4 FTE staff including three enforcement officers, two conservation officers, five planning policy officers, 13 development control officers and a major projects officer, with administrative and technical support. Nearly all posts are currently filled.
- 32 The service was restructured in December 2006 so that the building control and enforcement teams work alongside the development control and planning policy teams under one head of service. There are section heads for each of these four teams, although building control manager is a shared post with neighbouring Ipswich Borough Council.
- 33 The Council received 2,239 planning applications and 360 enforcement cases during 2006/07. The service generally receives a greater proportion of householder applications and fewer major applications compared to other districts.
- 34 The Council was designated as a Planning Standards Authority (PSA)⁴ between 2004/05 and 2006/07. This was because it did not meet government standards in one or more categories for the speed of processing planning applications. The Council is no longer designated as a PSA because performance now exceeds the required standards.
- 35 The Council's development control committee comprises two area based sub-committees serving the north and the south of the district. There is a pool of reserve committee members, and councillors are appointed to committees generally for a four-year term. The committee determines between 15 and 20 per cent of all planning applications.

³ Planning Delivery Grant was introduced by the government in 2003 as a means of providing councils' planning services with extra resources, and hence a further incentive, to improve the performance of key aspects of the service such as applications handling speed. This is a national priority for planning.

⁴ A Planning Standards Authority (PSA) is a Council that is under special monitoring arrangements by the Department for Communities & Local Government (DCLG) for not meeting government planning targets in one or more categories of BVPI 109. The Council has to agree an improvement plan with DCLG and remains designated as a PSA until performance shows improvement and this is sustained over a period of time.

- 36** The service can be accessed via letter, phone and the Council's website. Visitors to the Council offices in Woodbridge can speak to a duty officer at a dedicated planning services helpdesk.
- 37** The planning policy team is responsible for preparing the replacement to the local plan. Consultation on the issues and options stage of the core strategy has recently closed. The team also includes a policy implementation role for environmental enhancement schemes and a conservation function.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 38** The Council has sustained its focus on planning services over the last three years. Initially this was to deliver an improvement plan related to improving the performance of the development control part of the service, and specifically the service's performance in processing planning applications. More recently, the focus has shifted to concentrate on the service's ability to facilitate the delivery of wider corporate and community aims as set out in the Council's corporate plan and the local strategic partnership's (LSP) community plan. In the last two years, the Council has also responded to the challenge of working with partners across the county to deliver the priorities of the Suffolk local area agreement (LAA). The Council is for example the lead body co-ordinating the affordable housing element of the LAA across the county.
- 39** The Council sets out its priorities annually in its Best Value Performance Plan. Six priority themes are set out within a balanced scorecard and these have provided a consistent focus for the past three years. These priorities cover community well-being, economy, environment, housing, fiscal and democratic services and rural issues. In 2007/08 a green issues priority has been added.
- 40** Managers in planning services have responded to the corporate scorecard by setting out their intentions in a set of service level scorecards that align actions to the corporate scorecard priorities. Taking account of these scorecards, the BVPPs, the community plan and the local area agreement, the following planning-related priorities have formed the focus of planning service delivery and improvement over the last three years.
- Ensure improvement in development control performance.
 - Provide a robust and efficient planning service.
 - Meet local housing needs through providing affordable housing.
 - Provide prosperity for all, including rural communities.
 - Protect and enhance built and natural environment, including coastal protection and management.
 - Improve green performance by ensuring sustainability principles are promoted widely and guide council decision-making.

- 41 Planning services' scorecards for 2006/07 provide a focus on fast, efficient planning applications' handling and customer service. The following specific targets are included:
- 60 per cent of new homes/consent for new homes on brownfield sites;
 - 60 per cent of major applications determined within 13 weeks;
 - 70 per cent of minor applications determined within 8 weeks;
 - 80 per cent of other applications determined within 8 weeks;
 - 100 per cent of applications received passed on to planning officers within 3 working days;
 - 100 per cent of letters received seeking planning advice (where a formal response is given) responded to within 28 days;
 - 100 per cent of helpdesk staff appropriately trained to provide a satisfactory level of service;
 - all planning control breaches effectively investigated in accordance with targets;
 - establish structure of a local delivery vehicle (LDV) to implement the Felixstowe masterplan;
 - hit milestones in the local development scheme;
 - 90 affordable housing units per year; and
 - up-to-date appraisals and management plans for 33 per cent (10) of all conservation areas (each to be the subject of local consultation).
- 42 The Council has an up-to-date local plan, the most recent alteration being adopted in 2006. In terms of the authority's statutory role in revising the local plan, the Council has agreed a scheme of work (the local development scheme) which outlines its intention to prepare:
- a statement of community involvement (SCI⁵);
 - a core strategy and core policies;
 - site specific allocations and policies; and
 - action plans for Felixstowe, and Saxmundham and Leiston.
- 43 To date the Statement of Community Involvement has been finalised and adopted, and the core strategy has gone through two stages of consultation; visioning, and the issues and options arising from visioning.

⁵ The Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) is a document that states how the Council consults local people and stakeholders over planning applications and in producing the planning documents within the local development framework.

Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users?

Designing services in response to the needs of customers

- 44 The service's approach to setting and applying customer service performance standards has improved since the last planning inspection in early 2004. However, some areas for further improvement remain concerning the use of service standards and making more effective use of user involvement in the service to improve.
- 45 Service consultation on planning applications is working well. The Council exceeds minimum requirements on consulting on planning applications, keeping the public informed. It engages in community wide consultation for major applications and for example, 77 per cent of parish and town councils said that the Council consults well or very well on planning applications and understanding of reasons for decisions is high. The Council is enhancing the ability of stakeholders to understand and get involved in the planning process.
- 46 The service's web pages on the Council's website are well developed for specialist elements of the service and enforcement. These include in-house and external specialist services such as trees, archaeology and conservation. The page outlining the enforcement service, its priorities and service standards is particularly clear and well laid out. Those making or subject to enforcement complaints are able to see why and how quickly the Council intends to respond.
- 47 The service is responsive to issues raised by the public but is not making full use of opportunities to learn from feedback from the public. There is a well managed formal complaints procedure which irons out difficulties experienced by service users, and analysis of the use of the planning services helpdesk has lead to more efficient use of the duty officer. However, further use could be made of the 150 contacts a month through the planning help desk, public attendance at development control committees and liaison meetings with parish councillors and agent forums. Better structuring would enable the service to be more effective at understanding the aspects of the service that are valued or need improving.
- 48 Reporting on service performance other than the speed in which planning applications are determined to the public is under developed. Other than for the speed of determining planning applications, no performance related information is made available to the public, for example via the website, or at the planning reception. Better information on performance is now available to managers through information and communications technology (ICT) but this is insufficient to manage performance in relation to service standards. This means the service is not showing the public how it is performing.

- 49 Customer support in the pre-submission stages of the planning application process is in place but not well promoted. The development control charter focuses on standards applying to the applicant once an application is lodged with the Council. It does not explain the range and availability of services prior to lodging an application such as the availability of pre-application advice and the availability of a team and project management approach for larger, more complex applications. This means some applicants may not be benefiting from discussions effectively to enhance the quality of planning application submissions.

Accessibility of services

- 50 The planning service provides access to a good range of published advice as well as access to professional officers. The range of advice offered closely ties in with the Council's well-established priorities, for example, relating to preserving and enhancing the district's built and natural heritage. It also ties in with priorities for improvement such as affordable housing and the rural economy. Rural communities, for example, are able to access advice from planning officers and the Council's rural housing enabling officer to consider how housing needs might be identified and addressed. Leaflets have been produced with farmers in mind which focus specifically on planning applications for farm diversification. This demonstrates the service is aligning its advisory services to Council priorities.
- 51 Access to the service via traditional channels of communication is good. For example, a permanently staffed planning helpdesk is available during office hours at the Council's Woodbridge offices. Helpdesk staff deal with face-to-face and telephone enquiries. Visitors or callers are able to speak to a duty officer, a case officer or even specialist advisors such as the trees' officer or failing that find a diary slot for an appointment. Service users report that access by telephone or letter is usually effective, and a review of development control and enforcement case files indicates that letters, emails and phone calls are generally responded to within an appropriate timeframe. In most cases, the helpdesk or appointed case officer provides a single point of access for customers therefore ensuring that service users experience as far as possible a joined-up service.
- 52 The service is generally good at responding to the diverse needs of its customers in relation to customers with sensory or physical impairments or with different language needs. The Council's website will now provide an audio commentary for much of its web content, and the planning services helpdesk staff work hard to overcome barriers to access at the reception. Printed guidance is generally written in plain English and with a particular audience in mind. For example, clear explanations are given in enforcement letters and tailored advice is given to parish councillors on planning matters. However, there are exceptions where some language used in written communications is not in plain English, such as the delegation scheme, which sets out who makes planning decisions, and the protocol for accessing planning files.

- 53** Service satisfaction is generally high. Service satisfaction is above average in comparison to other district councils and service users report an increase in the speed in which applications are determined without eroding service quality. Levels of complaints about the service, views expressed by customers and staff, and a review of files show customers to be positive. However, although public response to development control committees is good, outcomes are not always clearly understood and visual aids are not always effective.
- 54** Access to the service via electronic means of communication such as via email, or the Council's website is improving steadily but at a similar rate to other Councils. The service has improved its use of technology as measured by its Pendleton⁶ score, but has done so at a similar rate as others, and therefore remains average in the latest assessment (December 2005). A major draw back is the inability of consultees or neighbours to view any plans on line, which leads to the inconvenience of travelling to the Council offices in Woodbridge or of finding a suitable time to visit the parish clerk to view plans. This means service users receive a more limited service than that achieved by many other councils.
- 55** The service is not promoting effective use of ICT by the public. For example, currently only four per cent of planning applications made to the Council are submitted on line, which is below the level currently achieved by many councils. A computer is available in the planning reception for visitors to use but this is not actively encouraged or supported. This means the planning service is unable to benefit from more efficient applications' handling procedures or more effective solutions to service users' enquiries.

Engaging with the community

- 56** The service is effective in engaging with the community on specific matters of planning policy. For example, housing and planning officers effectively consulted appropriate stakeholders in preparing the new planning policies relating to affordable housing, now adopted in the Local Plan (second alteration 2006). Work has continued since with potential landowners, parish councils and landlords in order to develop greater use of the exception sites for affordable housing in rural areas.
- 57** The service is using a wide range of techniques to engage effectively with the public on planning applications that are likely to be controversial. For example, for the Parham wind farm application, the Council made publicly available the business case prepared by the developer, it drew attention to the application via its website and Coastline⁷, and held the eventual development control meeting at a local venue including a public address system for those unable to get into the hall. In this way, the Council is encouraging interest and public involvement in matters that affect people's local environment.

⁶ An independent survey by Pendleton Associates (on behalf of the government) of Councils' websites to assess the availability and accessibility of online planning information and services. Councils are assessed against 21 criteria including the development control process, development plans and policy but not enforcement.

⁷ The quarterly magazine produced by the Council and distributed free to every household in the district.

- 58 Community engagement in developing the new planning policy framework is improving and using techniques to maximise public engagement. The service's approach to engagement in the past year has been structured and intensive, using tried and tested techniques. The policy team is aiming to engage the community widely and has set out its approach in the adopted (July 2006) statement of community involvement. To date, there has been some success for example in forging linkages between the core strategy and the community strategy through LSP partners. The core strategy issues and options consultation has recently come to a close. A range of different consultation versions suited to different audiences was prepared in order to maximise interest across the community in longer-term development of the district.
- 59 The Council has a well-established approach to engaging local communities in order to shape and implement local environmental enhancements. For example, both Saxmundham and Leiston have benefited from an area-based action planning approach supported by local communities. In addition, more than 25 per cent of parish and town councils in the district already have or are working on their own parish plans. Planning policy officers have been involved both in initial discussions and in the implementation phase of these plans. This demonstrates that the service is committed to supporting local communities prepare their own proposals for improvements to their communities.
- 60 Policies relating to the provision of play space through planning agreements with developers are successful in generating resources and local interest. Although arrangements are complicated, the Council has worked hard to make the scheme clear and accessible to parishes, and the use of these resources is increasing as more parishes are becoming involved. The policies have encouraged a greater local say in how shortfalls in local play space should be addressed.
- 61 The service has not built up an ongoing dialogue with users about what aspects of the service are effective and what needs improving. Although key stakeholders and users, such as parish councils, agents and developers meet with planning services on an occasional basis, they have a limited grasp on the improvements being made, or standards of service they can expect. Stakeholders consider such meetings are primarily an opportunity for dissemination and are not structured well to maximise their or the Council's learning. This is a missed opportunity for the Council and stakeholders to shape future plans for the service.

Valuing the diversity of communities within the district

- 62 The service has a track record of fair decision-making in relation to development that addresses specific minority needs. For example, the needs of faith communities have been taken into account in providing community facilities at the district centre on the Grange Farm estate at Kesgrave. The service has helped improve the policy basis for securing a greater share of affordable housing and has helped to provide housing for those with specific needs such as very sheltered housing and foyer schemes to meet the housing needs of young people. This demonstrates that the Council considers and addresses the needs of specific minorities in development proposals.

- 63 The Council is actively addressing the engagement of diverse groups in the formulation of planning policy. The service has taken initial steps in involving some groups at this early stage of development of the core strategy. Faith groups have registered to be involved, young people have participated in planning-related activities linked to the national curriculum with the help of LSP partners, and planning officers have approached gypsies and travellers with a view to their participation in a county-wide study. This shows the service is proactive in considering how diverse communities might be encouraged to participate in the development of the planning policy framework.
- 64 The service has a good record of working with partners in order to meet the needs of specific diverse communities. The Council has worked with Optua⁸ in providing specialist advice over access issues relating to the Council's own premises and also to planning applicants such as the Prison Service at Hollesley in order to provide DDA⁹ compliant showers and toilets. This arrangement with Optua provides further assurance that the needs of disabled people are fully taken into account in the development process.
- 65 The service has a structured approach to ensuring human rights considerations are taken into account in decision-making. The development control sub-committee, in determining the Parham wind farm application, was able to draw on written specialist legal advice presented within the body of the officers' committee report. Human rights issues are considered prior to serving enforcement notices, drawing on specialist legal advice. This ensures that the Council is able to take account of human rights issues when making planning decisions.

Is the service meeting local and national objectives?

- 66 The following section sets out how well the Council has performed against Council aims and local and national priorities, as described in the previous section headed 'What has the Council aimed to achieve'.

Delivering the development control improvement plan

- 67 The planning service has been successful in delivering its agreed improvement plan for the development control service. The service agreed its improvement plan with the government to tackle poor performance in May 2005. Within nine months of the start of implementing the plan, the government ceased to classify the Council as a planning standards authority (a poor performing council in terms of handling planning applications) and considered performance to be good. The service went on to deliver most actions within the improvement plan by December 2006.

⁸ A voluntary organisation which promotes and supports the needs of disabled people across Suffolk.

⁹ The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA 1995) aims to end the discrimination that many disabled people face. From 1 October 2004, Part 3 of the DDA 1995 has required businesses and other organisations to take reasonable steps to tackle physical features that act as a barrier to disabled people who want to access their services.

Providing a robust and efficient planning service

- 68 The planning service is now providing a robust and efficient service from a low base as a Planning Standards Authority three times in the past five years for its poor performance in determining planning applications within government timescales.
- 69 The service is currently performing well in addressing the national priority of determining planning applications quickly (BV109). The service exceeded the government's targets during 2005/06 and did so again in 2006/07, according to the Council's own figures. The service has met its own performance targets in the last two years, but in relation to other similar planning authorities, the service's BV109 performance has been more variable. Major application performance is now above average from the level of the worst Councils three years ago and other categories of planning application have moved from the worst performing Councils to below average in the same period.
- 70 Development control decision-making is robust. The service has a good record in terms of the low number of complaints and appeals upheld. In relation to planning appeals (BV204) the service has performed above average compared to other district councils in each of the past three years.
- 71 The planning policy team is making adequate progress in replacing the local plan with the Local Development Framework (LDF)¹⁰. The team has been effective in developing the evidence base that underpins the LDF, for example, in conducting employment, regeneration and housing growth studies for the district and specifically the Haven Gateway. Councillors are engaged in the plan making process through a local development framework working group. The service has a good track record in monitoring the use and effectiveness of the policies in the local plan. However, there has been some slippage in achieving the service's original milestones. A revised project plan has been prepared.
- 72 The service is efficient in relation to the resources it uses and the outcomes it delivers although there remains potential for further efficiencies. Departmental and team restructurings have improved the effectiveness of the service and also released savings. Improved ICT has made a small contribution to more efficient working, for example through the wider use of the Accolaid¹¹ system by planning reception staff, enforcement officers and development control case officers.
- 73 Response to the public is effective and efficient. Service standards are being met in most instances in relation to validating planning applications, issuing decision notices and responding to letters.

¹⁰ The Local Development Framework (LDF) is prepared by councils and comprises a folder of documents containing the local development scheme, local development documents and SCI.

¹¹ Accolaid is a computerised work management, information and reporting system used by the Planning Services.

Meeting local housing needs through providing affordable housing

- 74 The service has maintained a clear focus on improving the planning policy framework to increase the provision of affordable housing and over time has delivered above service targets and the performance of other Councils. The local plan second alteration (2006) has a broader based rural exceptions policy and through lower, more challenging thresholds. The Council is looking to deliver 120 units per year from 2007/08. Year on provision of affordable housing has increased and exceeded increasingly challenging targets. For example, in 2004/05, 52 units were completed exceeding the target of 40 and in 2005/06, 85 units were completed in the district exceeding the target of 65. Completion of affordable housing units is above average per thousand population against all English councils. Since then there has been a steady stream of planning approvals for affordable housing, but a decrease in the number of completed units, caused by a slowing down of the building rate over which the Council has little influence.
- 75 Planning officers have been successful in improving the stock of potential affordable housing for the public in other ways. For example, development of the Grange Farm estate on redundant land earmarked for employment purposes more than 15 years ago has enabled ten additional units over and above affordable housing requirements to be built for disabled residents. Similarly, the Council has increased housing densities in new development and improved numbers of one-and two-bed open market houses. At the Falcon caravan site near Martlesham, planners were able to introduce affordable housing, a mix of sizes of units and integrate local transport.

Providing prosperity for all

- 76 Existing planning policies have helped to ensure an adequate supply of employment land is available for both immediate and longer-term use. The service has an ongoing dialogue with key employers such as BT at Martlesham and University College Suffolk and those in the power generating industry in order to maximise the economic, social and environmental benefits to the district. At a more local level, the Council rigorously applies policies to protect employment land from change of use, including redundant farm buildings as far as is possible. The service is good in securing small-scale low cost employment sites that serve local communities, for example through granting consent of disused pig units for employment uses. The Council has been successful in retaining essential services such as pubs and shops in villages through planning policy. These approaches help to ensure that all communities remain sustainable and viable.

- 77 The service has been successful in creating sustainable communities where housing growth has been significant. Notable examples include the large developments at Rendlesham and at the Grange Farm estate, Kesgrave. Local plan policies have enabled housing target of 410 dwellings per year to be met. The service has ensured that housing growth has been accompanied by the development of appropriate community facilities such as the recreation and leisure facilities, library, and local retail centre on the Grange Farm estate, as well as a park and ride facility in close proximity. It has encouraged mixed development including local employment opportunities for example through the refurbishment of 30,000 square metres of floor space on the former Bentwaters technical airbase. This is providing communities with a stronger sense of place in growing settlements and is reducing the need for travel.
- 78 The service has been successful in achieving community benefits through planning agreements such as Section 106 planning obligations¹² and works well with other services however a framework is still developing. In some areas, the Council's requirements have been made clear to developers and the community through published guidance such as for contributions sought towards play space and addressing the need for affordable housing. However, there is no clear framework which outlines other benefits which will be sought and the justification for doing so. These are negotiated on a case by case basis and this approach runs the risk of developers being treated inconsistently, and of delay to the approval process and it hinders public confidence and accountability.
- 79 Arrangements are effective for designing out crime but the full impact of arrangements on community safety is not understood yet. Designing out crime principles are applied in liaison with the growing network of advisory functions at local level through neighbourhood policing as well as through the county level police architectural liaison officer in the assessment of development proposals. However, the service has not reviewed the impact of its focus on community safety although it intended to do so in 2006/07.

Protecting and enhancing built and natural heritage

- 80 The service has a strong track record in protecting and enhancing its built and natural heritage. This means working at a strategic level with external partners on matters such as coastal and estuary management and providing an emphasis on good contemporary as well as traditional design solutions at a local level.
- 81 The planning service strikes a good balance in being tough in some circumstances and flexible in others in order to protect its built heritage. For example, it is prepared to be tough in accordance with its policy framework through its enforcement work on listed buildings where appropriate. The Council is also flexible in permitting occasional policy exceptions where these will ensure remedial or renovation work to historic buildings is viable.

¹² Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 allows a local planning authority (LPA) to enter into a legally-binding agreement or planning obligation, with a land developer over a related issue. S106 agreements can act as a main instrument for placing restrictions on the developers, often requiring them to minimise the impact on the local community and to carry out tasks, which will provide community benefits.

- 82 The service is delivering good design using effective measures. The service has access to specialist officers in urban design and conservation and guidance designed to appeal to a range of audience such as for householders extending their property or owners of listed buildings. The service also champions strong contemporary design, which sets new standards such as the China Shipping building in Felixstowe, and supports more challenging designs in traditional settings, such as Lambert's Barn in Woodbridge. Design contribution has been recognised through achievement of a Prince's Trust reward for the development of the Seckford Alms Houses. Councillors have undertaken design tours to revisit and learn from permissions previously granted and now built. Quality of life for the community is enhanced.
- 83 The service works effectively with partners to preserve the district's natural heritage. The Council is a key and active partner in a wider partnership which manages the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Planners have worked well to secure resources through a s106 agreement to fund staff to oversee the delivery of wildlife management plan for the Landguard Peninsula at Felixstowe south.
- 84 The service has ensured in kind benefits arise from the development process which address the environmental legacy of previous site uses. For example, redevelopment work at the old Gasworks site in Woodbridge ensured land decontamination took place and the runway and concrete standing areas at the former Bentwaters airbase have been lifted and removed and reused as aggregate as part of the planning permission. These outcomes demonstrate that the service is able negotiate on a case by case basis additional benefits that raise the quality of the environment to the benefit of the wider community.
- 85 The Council is taking an active role in the management of the district's coastline to complement government funding. With the support of the planning service, the Council is an increasingly important voice in coastal management in the sub-region, and it is prepared to explore innovative solutions. The Council has worked with landowners and the community at Bawdsey to explore the use of a planning policy exception to provide resources through the uplift in land values from granting planning permission to fund coastal protection for the community. At Dunwich, the Council approved the trialling of innovative, low cost low visual impact coastal defences, which are now in place. This demonstrates the Council is encouraging new ways of providing coastal protection a key issue for the sub-region.
- 86 The enforcement service is effective but needs to be more proactive. It is managing its caseload well and pursues a range of actions in a timely way, including publicising some high profile cases as a preventative measure. An enforcement policy is in place and enforcement priorities are publicised. It uses a good system to flag up cases early with the parish councils so they can engage early and effectively in the enforcement process. However, it does not routinely evaluate how successful its actions are. Monitoring of conditions is not well developed. This can be important to the delivery of outcomes, such as protecting biodiversity.

- 87 The conservation service is highly valued and effective but capacity is affecting its ability to give advice and progress on conservation appraisals. Conservation works well with development control officers, applicants and other stakeholders in improving outcomes and is highly valued. However, the service is stretched to provide pre-application and post-application advice on conservation matters and also make the rate of progress in conservation appraisals anticipated in the local development scheme. As at the end of 2006/07 the service had begun work on two but had set a target to complete eleven and also adopt management plans for each. Due to limited capacity, the service has put a lower priority on policy development than on providing its advisory function, which means enhancement work resulting from up-to-date conservation appraisals risks being delayed.

Green Issues

- 88 The Council has a long track record of actions designed to improve its own environmental performance, for example through installing new water and energy saving devices where a business case can be made. However, while efforts have been made to minimise the Council's use of natural resources, there is no overarching environmental management framework in place, and no consistent council-wide measurement over time against a baseline position. The Council has taken some high profile steps to demonstrate its community leadership on green issues such as the grey water scheme at the Deben swimming pool, but other, more challenging steps such as developing a council-wide green travel plan have yet to be taken.
- 89 The Council has been working towards strengthening its approach during 2006/07 with the foundation of a Green Issues Task Group in early 2006. However, green issues only became a key priority theme for the Council in 2007/08. The group has been effective in bringing into focus the Council's green agenda and ensuring that development of the planning policy framework takes account of emerging green policy locally and nationally.
- 90 The green issues task group is encouraging the Council to set in place a more ambitious policy framework. Existing policies are in line with national policy guidelines or statutory requirements for example in dealing with renewable energy generation. New proposals within a revised Local Agenda 21 strategy proactively encourage renewable energy sourcing and production in the Suffolk Coastal area; and using planning and building control measures to encourage developments that adopt best practice in energy efficiency and use of renewable energy supplies. By prioritising green issues, the Council has started the debate about how ambitious it wants to be and how its ambitions can be delivered.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 91 The planning service as a whole provides good value for money. This is because overall the cost of providing the service is low in relation to the quality of the service and to the range of services provided whilst also taking into account the demands the services faces, the outcomes it delivers and the priority the Council places upon the service.

- 92 The Council spends an average amount on its planning services. Service expenditure on planning policy and development control is about average compared to Council's near neighbour authorities and all English districts based on CIPFA¹³ estimates for the years 2003/04, 2004/05 and 2005/06.
- 93 The Council spends well below average on its planning services when costs are equated to the number of applications the district receives, or to the size of the district in terms of population or area. For example, planning costs per head of population have remained well below average for the last three years, and the rate of increase has been smaller than elsewhere. In comparison to those councils providing CIPFA returns, the district has between 30 and 50 per cent more applications than the average district, and the district is 20 per cent larger by area and population. In addition, socio-economic, demographic and environmental factors such as the age profile of the local population, and quality of the built and natural environment all add to the cost and complexity of the planning function. The Council also receives proportionately more major applications than similar councils elsewhere¹⁴.
- 94 Since the restructure of the service, there is generally a good balance between the size of each team and the scale of its responsibilities, although less progress has been made in the case of the enforcement and conservation teams. Planning policy and development control staffing levels are now in line with similar authorities and individual caseloads are broadly in line with government guideline levels. The service has a good balance of experience within its staff. This experience has been gained within and beyond the district.
- 95 Management arrangements for decision-making on planning applications generally strike the balance between efficiency, effectiveness and community leadership from councillors. New planning service team structures provide good overall supervision and accountability for delegated decision-making. In addition, the Council has reviewed the delegation agreement several times in the last three years. Delegation levels have remained between 80 and 85 per cent for the last four years which is low in comparison to many councils. Given the high number of applications received by the Council, this still means up to 400 decisions per year are made by councillors. This represents a significant additional cost in terms of officer and councillor preparatory time but the Council has weighed this up against the benefits councillors bring through their involvement in decision-making and agreed the level of delegation is about right.

¹³ CIPFA (Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accounting) compiles planning statistics on expenditure annually. Councils participate on a voluntary basis. Around 60 per cent of district councils participate.

¹⁴ Based on January to December 2006 BV109 figures for Suffolk Coastal DC and its 15 near neighbours.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 96 The Council has responded successfully to the challenge of poor performance in planning services. In 2005 the Development Control Improvement Plan (DCIP) was adopted with the aim of increasing the speed of processing planning applications. The service has used planning delivery grant to improve the use of ICT, procedures, and staffing levels and as a result, the service has significantly improved its performance in the handling of planning applications.
- 97 The speed of processing planning applications has shown a sustained improvement. Since 2003/04, the speed of determining all three categories of planning applications (BV109a; major applications, BV109b; minor applications and BV109c; other applications) has improved consistently and now meets government standards. The improvement has continued throughout 2006/07. The Council's own data shows that for the first three quarters of last year, the time taken to process major and minor applications continued to improve and was faster than the corresponding quarters of 2005/06.
- 98 The Council has a good track record in making planning decisions in accordance with adopted planning policy. The Council's performance on planning appeals (BV204) is good since few appeals are upheld by the Planning Inspectorate compared to other councils. Relative performance has been consistently in the best quartile since 2004/05 and actual performance has shown signs of improvement. This shows that the Council has been successful in maintaining the quality of its planning decision-making while also improving the speed of processing applications.
- 99 The Council has responded to the challenge of previous inspections. Most recommendations from the 2004 Audit Commission planning inspection have been responded to in order to put in place improvements for service users. These include the establishment of an agents and developers' forum, the introduction of public speaking at development control sub-committees and a helpdesk facility at the Council's offices in Woodbridge. This demonstrates the service is committed to benefiting from sources of external challenge in order to improve customers' experience of the service.
- 100 However, not all actions to improve the service have been implemented successfully. For example, it has proved difficult to improve the wheelchair access to the planning helpdesk in the Council offices at Woodbridge (although alternative arrangements have been made) and to improve the use of visual aids in planning committees due to the building design. Other actions have only been partially addressed, such as the setting of service standards in conjunction with users, and making the Council's website accessible at the planning reception. Benefits of improvement for customers have not been maximised.

- 101** Planning services have been making operational efficiencies and improving value for money. The service was restructured in late 2006. As part of the DCIP, the service undertook a more detailed staffing review in 2006/07. This review has improved utilisation of the planning workforce and introduced more integrated line and team management arrangements. Planned levels of expenditure for the service have fallen 7.5 per cent between 2006/07 and 2007/08. In addition the service has also introduced better operational procedures for example in handling planning applications. The outcomes from these actions are not only better service delivery but also improve value for money.
- 102** There has been limited progress in securing efficiency savings from the application of ICT, from joint delivery arrangements or from exploiting alternative ways of working. For example, case officers' potential to work away from the office is hampered by an inability to access electronically essential information within case files. This means that the Council is not maximising the potential for efficient working and customer service from ICT.
- 103** The Council does not know the real extent of improvements as experienced by users. Although the Council has undertaken actions to improve customer focus, these have not been measured or evaluated to show if improvement in satisfaction has taken place. Where improvement has been planned and delivered in relation to engagement with the community, this has not been sustained and focused. Without any clear measurement of improvement, the Council cannot demonstrate (apart from informal or anecdotal feedback) the impact of improvement for users.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 104** The Council is clear about the importance of the planning service in meeting its wider aims and priorities. Councillors and officers all share this view. The service is central in achieving the Council's aims and priorities, as an enabler as well as a direct provider of services. For example, the planning service effectively collaborates with other partners (both internal and external to the Council) to achieve strategic priorities including the Haven Gateway project, the impact of Sizewell decommissioning, coastal protection and the provision of affordable housing. This helps to ensure that the Council has influence in the key planning decisions that affect the area.
- 105** Plans link together well. There is good co-ordination in the way wider community plans and plans for the service are developed. For example, there is a degree of common membership between the LSP and the Council's task group developing the local development framework and this ensures that community and spatial plans are co-ordinated and share common strategic aims. In addition, LSP and Council corporate aims are complementary. This helps to ensure that planning policies to promote rural access to services and affordable housing meet the needs of the wider community.

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- 106** The Council has a clear vision of where the service has come from, where it is, and where it is going. Priorities are reviewed annually, and the focus on the service has shifted from a narrow regulatory, professionally driven service with limited corporate accountability to a service that is responsive, ambitious and collaborative. Senior councillors consider the momentum for continuous improvement in the service is well established and that the service now needs to focus on its role in enabling the delivery of wider corporate ambitions, such as the recently adopted green issues priority of the Council. This places the service in a strong position to move forward and face the challenges of the future.
- 107** Over the past two years, the Council has remained focused on addressing key performance weaknesses within development control. A specific, nominated, portfolio holder was appointed to oversee the implementation of the DCIP and monitor progress against the plan. This arrangement has had the effect of ensuring there is political leadership to maintain improvement.
- 108** Service managers have a clear understanding about what needs to be improved. The planning services area scorecard for 2007/08 identifies the key objectives and priorities for improvement. This scorecard is supported by service scorecards and individual appraisals. Key actions include:
- developing guidance to improve the delivery of s106 agreements;
 - establishing systems to measure performance against service standards and monitoring customer satisfaction;
 - developing actions to deliver an improved enforcement service; and
 - training staff to be better aware of diversity issues and the impact on local communities.

These actions demonstrate awareness that the service knows where its focus for improvement is and that it is committed to addressing this in order to deliver a better service for users.

- 109** Performance management in the service remains variable. The performance management culture has moved forward corporately and in planning during the past two years. Better commitment from councillors and officers and a new corporate performance information system have facilitated this. The service has introduced arrangements for reviewing performance. For example, service performance is now a regular item for team meetings and data is used to manage case officers' workloads. The improved emphasis on performance management has led to better case handling and an improvement in service performance for users such as improvements in processing s106 agreements and quicker times for processing applications.
- 110** However, performance management is not used effectively to manage and improve customers' experience of the service. Performance against customer standards is not routinely captured, reported or used to facilitate improvement. Without a robust approach to performance data in key areas, it is difficult for the service to identify what action needs to be done to improve service delivery.

- 111 The service has good managerial, professional and political leadership. The impact and leadership of the current head of service has been an important factor in improving performance and delivering change. In addition, councillors take a keen interest in the service. Portfolio holders are enthusiastic about the service and are highly knowledgeable upon such matters as coastal protection. This helps to ensure that there is visible and effective leadership at all levels.
- 112 Several key corporate strategies are yet to deliver improvements at service level. These are being implemented, but have to filter down to services. The strategies include access to services, workforce development and diversity. For example, work is progressing with heads of service in implementing workforce development planning, but it is still early days. In implementing its equalities strategy, the Council is not planning to undertake impact assessments within services until later in 2007. The service has contributed to impact assessments at a corporate level but assessments to date have not been informed directly by service users. This means that at present, the outcomes of such strategies at service level are limited and the impact on delivering better planning services for users remains uncertain.
- 113 Arrangements to promote diversity in the delivery of planning services are not yet in place. The duty is clearly set out in the Council's 2005 equality and diversity policy. However, the service is at an early stage in implementing actions within its equalities action plans. Officers and councillors now have an awareness, but an inconsistent understanding, of the communities served by planning services, and the impact of the district's diverse communities on the way services are or should be provided.
- 114 Detailed plans for improvement in some areas remain undeveloped. For example, some actions in the service area scorecard are dependent upon further review and planning work before a clear way forward emerges or are subject to opportunities presenting themselves. These include actions to measure customer satisfaction. Although the Council has a continuing and clear commitment to improve enforcement, plans to address known weaknesses remain undeveloped. Until these actions are developed, the service could miss the opportunity to improve in these areas.
- 115 Learning from experience is inconsistent. For example, the service has learned from complaints and has reviewed procedures to ensure that service failures are not repeated. Appeal decisions and the likely consequences for policy and decision-making are reviewed routinely in committee, and committee members have visited developments arising from recent permissions as a learning exercise. However, the Council does not maximise feedback opportunities as to how customers view the service such as through the agents and developers' forum, visitors to the helpdesk or planning committee. In this way, valuable learning opportunities are lost.

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- 116** Not all actions in the improvement plan have been fully completed. Some tasks in the DCIP are outstanding, for example, work on arrangements for managing s106 agreements is still underway. There are plans to merge the development control and building control administration support teams to provide integrated working and better value for money. Although work is underway in these areas, it is still early days and benefits in the form of improved service delivery are not yet apparent.
- 117** There is a lack of robust plans to develop the service's electronic capability. There have been some significant improvements, for example, the use of ICT systems for management reporting, and for customers the ability to track progress and view applications and decision notices on line. However, future plans are poorly defined with no overall framework to guide developments and are not being influenced by a clear strategy that includes a focus on customers. In the meantime, there is still a reliance on paper-based systems, and no means to take advantage of any online planning submissions. This lack of clear plans to develop ICT systems is therefore a barrier to further improvement.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 118** The Council has taken a sensible and sustainable approach to investing planning delivery grant. In recent years, the Council has received above average awards compared to other district councils. It has invested a proportion each year to improve the service and rolled forward the rest into a reserve fund that the service can benefit from in future years. The reserve will meet the recurrent costs of the existing, enhanced staff complement through to the end of April 2010, thereby providing continuity for the service.
- 119** The planning service is successfully attracting external funding for the benefit of local people. For example, the effectiveness of the Council's policy in securing funding for play equipment and open space through the planning process has resulted in excess of £1 million of resources over a four-year period for the implementation of local schemes via parish councils. Although the policy framework has been in place for more than five years, the Council keeps the local assessment of needs up-to-date, and this also includes schemes in the pipeline. This keeps the policy robust, and ensures resources for community benefit are secured and applied fairly.
- 120** Officers within the planning service and councillors work well with partners to achieve strategic goals relevant to the Council's priorities. Notable examples include the well established Haven Gateway Partnership, its local delivery vehicle in the district, the Felixstowe Futures Group, and a range of partnerships aimed at managing the district's coasts and estuaries. The district is benefiting from funding secured through the Haven Gateway since it was given growth point status in 2006. Funding is enabling stronger plans to be brought forward more rapidly for the regeneration, and development of the Felixstowe peninsula.

- 121** Internal team working is effective and helping to improve capacity. The Council holds internal development forums on a regular basis. These bring together officers from a range of services to discuss up and coming major developments and establish multi-disciplinary project teams. Recent examples include the redevelopment of the Notcutts site in Woodbridge and the Felixstowe south seafront development proposals. All services report having effective relationships in their dealings with the planners both as advisors and partners. These relationships help improve the Council's capacity by making it better able to respond to major developments and offer a more holistic service to applicants.
- 122** The service has effectively addressed staffing issues to increase capacity and improve service delivery. A staffing review commenced in 2006. This aims to achieve more efficient working and greater flexibility within the service. By March 2007, a combined management structure for the service (which combines planning policy, development control and building control) had been introduced. This provides clearer lines of accountability with fewer people reporting to the head of service and the creation of specialist function teams. As a result, there is now better cross-functional working between teams and improved service delivery.
- 123** The Council has successfully addressed recruitment difficulties. As part of the staffing review, the Council has introduced a system of career grades to address recruitment problems and develop staff within planning services. Trainees are able to gain experience whilst studying for a professional qualification and are offered a range of experiences, for example, working on project teams. This not only makes good use of their skills, but also helps provide additional learning opportunities. Feedback from officers and trainees suggests that the scheme is working successfully. The Council is now better placed to maintain staffing levels in the face of national recruitment difficulties and avoid capacity problems that could affect service delivery.
- 124** Financial planning within the Council is effective. The 2007/08 budget has been set in line with the projections identified in the medium-term financial strategy. Increases in expenditure of development control have been identified for 2007/08 although there is a 7.5 per cent decrease overall across the service. Actions to control the expenditure and generate efficiency savings are also planned in order to improve value for money and ensure the service does not exceed its planned budget.
- 125** There is good use of councillors in decision-making. The two development control sub-committees of the planning committee are structured in such a way as to maximise the contribution from councillors, balancing experience with a small pool of reserves. The Council ensures consistency of decision-making by having the same chairman for both development control sub-committees. Training is mandatory for all members and periodic updating takes place when necessary. Plans are already advanced for revised induction and development training for members after the May 2007 elections. This helps to ensure that councillors are knowledgeable and confident in decision-making.

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- 126** The service has limited outcomes to date from collaborating with other organisations in order to develop capacity amongst professional, technical and administrative staff in the service. There has been useful joint commissioning of studies with other councils to assist in developing the planning policy framework, for example, on housing need in the Ipswich policy area and on the needs of gypsies and travellers. The Council also has a partnership with Ipswich Borough Council to jointly deliver building control services. But discussion with other organisations to share and develop joint capacity, for example in the conservation or enforcement services, is at a very early stage, and is generally prompted as vacancies arise rather than in a proactive way. The Council has made a bid with neighbouring authorities in Suffolk to develop shared and integrated services across the county through the innovative pathfinder bid. However, detailed plans to deliver this are presently unspecified and outcomes are not yet apparent.
- 127** The scrutiny function is not fully effective in improving the role of planning. Although there has been some productive joint working with the Cabinet on housing issues, Scrutiny tends to focus on understanding the planning issues it faces rather than promoting improvement. This means the scrutiny function is not currently able to effectively challenge and improve planning services within the Council.
- 128** Although corporate barriers to improving information technology are known, solutions have not yet been determined. The current corporate information technology provision does not meet the future needs of the Council and future options are being explored. This uncertainty is slowing down the development of systems that could improve the efficiency, effectiveness and benefits to customers in planning services.

Appendix 1 – Service performance data

Table 1 Planning specific performance indicators used in the report (nationally available)

BVPI	2003/04	Quartile	2004/05	Quartile	2005/06	Quartile	2005/06 target	2006/07 target	12 months to December 2006
BVPI 109a of major applications determined within 13 weeks	22%	Worst	30%	Worst	68%	2nd	57%	65%	81% (DCLG)
BVPI 109b of major applications determined within 8 weeks	42%	Worst	40%	Worst	72%	3rd	63%	75%	79% (DCLG)
BVPI 109c of major applications determined within 8 weeks	73%	3rd	68%	Worst	87%	3rd	80%	88%	90% (DCLG)
BVPI 106 Percentage of new homes built on previously developed land	49%	Worst	46%	Worst	61%	3rd	60%	60%	N/A
BVPI 204 percentage of appeals allowed against decision to refuse permission	N/A	N/A	25%	Best	22%	Best	25%	25%	N/A
BVPI 205 Quality of service checklist	N/A	N/A	83%	2nd	89%	3rd	88%	94%	N/A
BVPI 111 Percentage of applicants satisfied with service provided	2003/4 70%	3rd			Surveys are not comparable until position relative to all others councils is taken into account.			2006/07 74% Act	

Source: Nationally collected and reported BVPIs (except where marked DCLG: government performance figures)

Table 2 Other planning specific performance indicators used in the report, in addition to those prescribed (or no longer prescribed) nationally

Other PIs collected and reported locally	2003/04	Quartile	2004/05	Quartile	2005/06	Quartile	2005/06 target	2006/07 target
Cost of planning services per capita (CIPFA returns)	£11.96	£14.74 Ave.	£12.49	£15.45 Ave.	£14.05	£16.97 Ave		
Planning expenditure reported in AC VFM profiles (using near neighbour group of 16 similar authorities)	£9.40	2nd lowest cost quartile	£8.30	lowest cost quartile	£8.60	lowest cost quartile		
Pendleton score e-planning	2004 11	2nd	May 2005 12	3rd	Dec 2005 19	3rd		
(BVPI 188) Decisions delegated to officers as a percentage of all decisions	84%		82%		85% est.		Good practice guideline figure is 90%	
No of planning applications received (CIPFA returns)	2,413	1597 Ave.	2,330	1,700 Ave.	2,046	1,500 Ave.		2,239 actual
Enforcement case load	392		402		448			360 est
Affordable housing (completions)	Ave 75 units in preceding 10 years.		52 units		85 units		60-77	90 (est. 60 outturn)

Source: Data as reported by Council, taken from CIPFA returns or IDeA planning advisory services (Pendleton scores)