

Wychavon District Council

Pathfinder Interim Corporate Assessment
Report

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Framework

The White Paper '*Strong Local Leadership – Quality Public Services*' acknowledges the importance of strong leadership in local government:

'High quality council services rely on strong corporate governance from their political and administrative leaders. Where individual services fail the reason often lies in political or administrative shortcomings at the heart of the organization.'

For this reason Corporate Assessment (CA) is an important component of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA). It sits alongside service and audit assessments in providing key information to feed into the comprehensive assessment framework. Its aim is to assess community leadership as well as corporate arrangements and capacity to support services in delivering improvements. The outcome of the CA is one judgement about proven capacity to improve. The methodology for CA has been developed from the following tried and tested approaches.

CA seeks to answer four fundamental questions which are underpinned by specific themes:

1 – What is the council trying to achieve?

- ◆ Ambition
- ◆ Focus
- ◆ Prioritisation

2 – How has the council set about delivering your priorities?

- ◆ Capacity
- ◆ Performance management

3 – What has the council achieved / not achieved to date?

- ◆ Achievement
- ◆ Investment

4 – In light of what has been learnt, what does the council plan to do next?

- ◆ Learning
- ◆ Future plans

Appendix 1 sets out the work that has been done by the Audit Commission's Corporate Assessment Team (CAT) to assess the council's performance against these themes. Each of the themes has been given a score between 1 and 4, based on the following scale:

- 1 – Very weak: few or no identifiable strengths
- 2 – Fairly weak: some strengths, but on balance these are outweighed by weaknesses
- 3 – Fairly strong: some weaknesses, but on balance these are outweighed by strengths
- 4 – Very strong: few or no identifiable weaknesses

The scores for the themes will be used to inform the overall judgement:

What is the council's proven capacity to improve?

Summary of judgements

- 1 Wychavon District Council has ambitions to improve its area, is delivering many quality services and has high satisfaction rates for many of its services whilst maintaining the annual council tax increase to 2.5 per cent. It has a short to medium term vision, expressed in its 'Priorities and Promises' (Ps & Ps), but needs to develop a long term vision for the future of the district. It understands local needs which should assist in developing a vision. Day-to-day services are generally good and Ps & Ps provide a focus for delivering them, but the council needs to ensure staff do not become complacent and continually strive to improve services. Social inclusion and diversity issues are also not embedded in its work or its ambitions.
- 2 Councillors provide strong leadership. Staff are committed and enthusiastic and work well with councillors, but have limited capacity to take on new work. Budgetary control is strong but changes are needed to align base budgets to anticipated spending. Wychavon uses procurement to extend capacity, uses IT well and is developing human resource practices. However, risk management is a recognised weakness and the race equalities scheme is not yet adopted, although a document is out for consultation.
- 3 Ps & Ps are owned by councillors and officers and provide three year goals with annual 'promises' but are not clearly identified in service plans or contain all of the public's priorities – for example providing affordable housing. Performance management has been simplified and improved over the last two years, with an increased focus on key corporate indicators. However, it is still patchy. Those service areas that are improving also have good performance management. Scrutiny is underdeveloped and the executive board is not robustly challenged, although members are encouraged to pose questions prior to the executive board decision. Non-executive councillors are also not used to maximum effect in the management of the council.
- 4 Wychavon generally provides good services but the housing service is poor. Over the past three years some projects have enhanced the environment, local economy and improved access to services in rural areas. Of 36 performance indicators, 21 improved (such as facility for people to be able to recycle and amount recycled), four remained the same, but 11 got worse (such as paying its bills on time). The council considers it is delivering good services but recognises that some staff can be complacent, with a lack of motivation to continually improve all services. Whilst the council is open and listens to others, it does not always learn from them or its own experiences, although some informal networks do exist to share good practice.
- 5 Partnerships are well established and the council enjoys good relationships with housing associations, the county council and other local councils. Partnerships have delivered local improvements, for example the Market Towns Initiative. However, the council recognises it now needs to evaluate partnerships to make sure they are delivering real outcomes for local people.
- 6 Wychavon and its partners have produced a draft community plan which is out for consultation and is shortly to be adopted. The council recognises that future

planning for services is mixed and is seeking to address this in the new community plan and its Ps & Ps.

- 7 National and local priorities are being addressed by a mixture of procurement options. The council needs to develop a longer term financial strategy which will need to link to the long term vision, when adopted, and community plan targets.

Recommendations

8 We recommend that the council should:

- ◆ Focus on delivering the community plan with partners. The council should then make sure a long term corporate vision is developed, with linked priorities and cascade these into service and staff development plans:
 - ◆ the council's plans should address local and national priorities, specifically for housing, recycling and joint waste management arrangements and community safety.
- ◆ Provide effective leadership and direction to ensure that social inclusion and equalities becomes integral to the council's work.
- ◆ Develop and implement an improved system for performance management that strengthens links between service plans and corporate priorities, provides clear and measurable outcomes and targets and mechanisms through which councillors are actively engaged in managing performance.
- ◆ Develop scrutiny arrangements, including the training of councillors, so that scrutiny makes an effective contribution to decision making and performance management.
- ◆ Review financial strategy in light of the new long term corporate vision including budget setting and linking funding to services and future priorities.

Context

The locality

- 9 Wychavon District Council is the largest of the six districts in Worcestershire. The district is a mix of market towns and rural communities; the three main centres of population are the towns of Droitwich Spa, Evesham and Pershore. The area has a population of around 113, 500. Wychavon is predicting a significant increase in population by 2011, a growth of 5.8 per cent, which is much higher than forecast for Worcestershire and higher than the national average. The area has above average home ownership and an above average satisfaction rating – 89 per cent are satisfied with the area as a place to live.
- 10 Based on the 1991 census information, Wychavon has a low black and ethnic minority population with 0.4 per cent of the population; travellers form the largest minority ethnic grouping.
- 11 In terms of employment – distribution, hotels and restaurants are the most important sector and the district attracts around 3.5million visitors each year. The Vale of Evesham is a significant centre for producing fruit and vegetables. Unemployment in the district is low at 1.5 per cent in 2002, compared to the national average of 3.5 per cent. There are an estimated 4,000 businesses in the district. These range from a few larger manufacturing and distribution industries in the north with its closer links to the West Midlands conurbations, to a large number of small scale businesses in more rural areas.

The council

- 12 The Conservatives hold overall political control with 34 of the 49 seats, the Liberal Democrats hold 10 seats, Labour have 4 and the remaining seat is held by an Independent. The council adopted a new political structure in May 2002 with a leader and executive board. This is supported by an overview and scrutiny committee, a development control & licensing committee and a standards committee. The council's net revenue budget for 2001/02 was £10.09million. The council has 290 staff and is the second largest employer in the area.
- 13 The council's aim, as set out in its annual report for 2002/03, is to:
'Work in partnership with our local community to develop a council that provides value for money services and opportunities to meet the ever changing needs of the community with an improvement year on year'.

Within the plan the council has identified 3 priorities:

- ◆ **'A well managed council** – running efficiently, using your money on services inline with what you want.
- ◆ **A healthy and safe environment now and for the future** – because health, crime and natural environment are the things you want us to focus on.
- ◆ **A prosperous local economy** – jobs, tourism, sports and culture are important to you too.'

- 14 For each of these priorities the council has identified a series of three year goals and specific promises to deliver during 2002/03. These have become known collectively as the 'Priorities and Promises' (Ps & Ps).

Priority	3 year goals	Promises for 2002/03
<p>1.</p> <p>A well managed council</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure sound financial management • Deliver rigorous best value reviews • Consult and communicate with our customers • Reduce bureaucracy • Maintain IIP status • Use IT to improve services and progress the IEG target • Get the basics right – good value services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hold DC council tax increase to 2.5% • Deliver 4 best value reviews, including 1 on cutting bureaucracy • Consult our Residents' Panel • Develop a stronger Wychavon brand • Review complaints, identify key measures • Implement the IIP improvement plan • Open Evesham Giant One Stop Shop • Make sure 50% of business can be delivered by new technology • Improve weaker services from MORI •
<p>2.</p> <p>A healthy and safe environment, now and for the future</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage flood alleviation • Reduce crime and fear of crime through campaigns and initiatives • Balance the needs for development with protecting the environment • Encourage involvement in sports and leisure • Increase waste recycling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement 4 flood alleviation schemes • Get CCTV coverage into hotspots • Take local plan to enquiry stage • Develop Wychavon's community plan • Develop action focused area forums • Cut Civic Centre greenhouse gas emissions • Designate at least 1 new local nature reserve • Open Pershore Leisure Centre • Increase youth participation in sport by 5% • Extend kerbside recycling to 50% households
<p>3.</p> <p>A prosperous local economy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Target resources to people most in need • Play active role in supporting people • Help create a thriving economy, encouraging self help and private sector involvement • Promote cultural opportunities • Promote Wychavon to visitors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Target 30% grant aid towards health schemes • Make funding available to build 100 affordable homes • Support 6 village retail and PO initiatives • Maximise resources from WM MTP to deliver 6 regeneration projects • Make available 30 grants to encourage new businesses and 12 grants to support existing businesses • Play our role in Worcestershire cultural strategy • Increase private advertising and sponsorship

What is the council trying to achieve?

Ambition

- 15 Wychavon District Council is delivering many quality services, whilst limiting the annual council tax increase to 2.5 per cent. The council has clearly stated and communicated its priorities in its annual report and identified associated promises to deliver these priorities. This is defined by the council as *'good quality services and sound financial management – getting the basics right.'* There is clear officer and member ownership of the recently adopted council's priorities and promises. However, partly due to timing, service plans last year did not clearly identify achieving corporate priorities, although draft plans for 2003/04 do demonstrate links to the priorities. There is a solid foundation to establish ambitions and the council has made good progress on developing a community plan so that a long term vision for the future of Wychavon can be developed. However, at this stage, the community plan has not been formally adopted and the Ps & Ps are only for the short to medium term. Weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area.
- 16 At the beginning of 2002/03, the council reviewed its aims and objectives to take on board both national priorities and the views of local people. This has resulted in the Ps & Ps contained in the council's Annual Report *'Reach for the Stars'*, as identified above. It is clear that of the three council priorities, the most important to councillors is the need to effectively manage the council and its finances.
- 17 The overarching priorities are ambitious and the medium term corporate goals reflect the current important issues to local people, such as flood alleviation. Key national priorities are for the most part addressed, such as community safety and increased recycling. Whilst the council is undertaking some schemes, social inclusion is not integral to the council's planning and strategies.
- 18 There is active and visible leadership around the Ps & Ps from members and senior managers, many staff are clear about the corporate priorities and their role in delivering on the council's promises.
- 19 The council has identified what are its priorities and is prepared to identify things which are not priorities, seeking to obtain external funding for their delivery. As the council has extensive resources, it has not taken the hard decisions of reducing services if they do not link with priorities. The council has not got an explicit long term vision for the council as the priorities are only for a three year period, with any changes being deferred until after the elections in May.
- 20 The service plans for 2002/03 did not all clearly and explicitly contribute to achieving the priorities and are of variable quality. Some are not clear or ambitious. This is in part because the Ps & Ps have only been adopted within the last year and so some did not cascade into the service plans. Some staff and managers consider the new priorities as just an indication of what the council is trying to achieve, and not a definitive list of priorities.
- 21 There is a solid foundation to establish ambitions so that a long term vision for the future of Wychavon can be articulated and promoted to local people. The council plans to distribute the community plan, which is shortly to be adopted, to

all households in March 2003. However, more needs to be done to make sure links between the county level plan and the local community plan are made.

Focus

- 22 The council uses the Ps & Ps as a means of maintaining focus. Ps & Ps have started to focus managers towards delivering the three corporate priorities but are yet to act as a driver for service delivery. The delivery of the promises are the main focus of councillors and senior managers for improving performance. They appear as consistent key messages and a way of communicating successes to the public. Progress against the promises is reported half yearly. Historically, the council has maintained a focus on delivering good services and has the ability to focus on improving services when problems arise. However, some strategies have not been owned or evaluated and the council has been slow in developing a community strategy, although good progress has now been made and it is now nearing adoption. Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area.
- 23 Members, managers and staff are aware of the priorities the council has identified and there is a strong culture of ‘we deliver’, ‘we want to improve’ and ‘we listen to the customer’ underpinning the delivery of achievements. For example, there has been a clear and consistent focus to improve the planning service – it is now the fastest improving planning service in England.
- 24 However, partly due to the recent adoption of the Ps & Ps, there are few coherent strategies in place below this level which are driving improvements in services. Service plans, while making reference to the priorities, do not clearly demonstrate how they will be delivered or translate into measurable outcomes. Where the council has produced strategies they generally have not been owned, reviewed or evaluated.
- 25 The three local strategic partnerships (LSPs) cover Wychavon in Droitwich, Evesham and Pershore, using the Market Towns Boards with an overarching group which has the role of pulling together the local needs and desires into one community strategy. However, the boards are essentially about managing funding and not about strategic planning; therefore co-ordination is through a single Core Group with representatives from each group, members and external partners.
- 26 The executive board and senior management team have the ability to maintain focus on some key issues. For example, the council has maintained a focus for a number of years on keeping council tax rises to a minimum and delivering quality services. The council has also shown it can focus to put things right in poorer performing services.
- 27 Service planning and budget setting processes are being brought together for 2003/04. This process is based on the promises to achieve the existing priorities. In order to achieve waste minimisation, it is recognised that there will need to be significant changes in service delivery in the forthcoming year with associated funding.
- 28 The council’s priorities are not consistently clear. For some services, the council is clear what it wants to achieve and is taking steps to achieve them, such as:

- ◆ Recycling and community safety targets reflect both national and local priorities.
- ◆ Providing for the needs of the young.
- ◆ How private house builders to contribute to providing affordable housing

29 However, below these high level statements its priorities are less clear. Its policy of using s106 agreements to provide affordable housing lacks a clear framework, and it is not clear what the specific objectives are for key service improvements for example, in refuse collection, street cleaning and health promotion. Grants and enforcement activity is not targeted to ensure the greatest needs are being met. Social inclusion is not embedded in the work of the council, although there are individual examples of projects. The council also does not consider race issues as a priority as it states the black and minority ethnic (BME) population for the district is 0.4 per cent; however, this is about 500 people in the community.

Prioritisation

- 30 The council is committed to consulting local people to find out what matters to them and has used consultation well to gather the views of local people. It is clear that the corporate priorities and promises reflect most of these views as well as national priorities. There are examples where improvements in the quality of the local environment have been initiated by this closeness to the community and funding is directed at priorities. However, the council has made limited use of other service intelligence to inform priority setting. There is also limited evidence that the council has shifted resources away from non priority areas in order to target priorities, although this is in part due to the strong financial position of the council. Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area.
- 31 The council has information available to help it prioritise, allocate funding and support service delivery. The information includes a recent Housing Needs Survey, an Urban Capacity Study and good consultation as part of the revision of the local plan. The council has made extensive use of the MORI consultation and has identified the key services residents would like to see the council deliver. These have been well communicated to local communities through press releases, council magazine and the annual report.
- 32 The programme options process is a mechanism through which the council each year identifies areas for growth and extra resources. Service managers make bids to the executive board and the criteria then used in judging the priority of these bids includes an assessment of how far the project or issue contributes to council priorities. In previous years, the promises were not determined before the budget and service plan processes. However, the most recent papers presented to the council's executive board seek to look at 'Programme Options, Service Plans and Promises for 2003/04.'
- 33 The council has provided extra resources to deliver improvements in priority areas, such as affordable housing, the planning service, recycling and leisure facilities. For example, £31.5million (capital refundable from the Housing Corporation) to achieve one of the council's promises for affordable housing. The council will need to prioritise forthcoming initiatives where there is limited staff capacity.

- 34 The council has had a healthy financial position for many years, generating income from its £39million investments, and has been able to fund one off projects and initiatives from reserves. The council is also prepared to identify what are not its priorities and has identified that it will only use 'other people's money' to fund the 'nice but not essential' service improvements. However, as the council has extensive resources there has been little evidence that the council has taken hard decisions and has shifted its own resources away from non priority areas in order to target priorities.

How has the council set about delivering its priorities?

Capacity

- 35 The council has strong leadership, capable senior managers and committed members. There is an open and successful approach to procurement and partnerships are well established. The council has the financial capacity to fund its ambitions. However, whilst a human resources strategy has very recently been adopted, practices now need to be embedded throughout the organisation. A race equalities scheme has not yet been adopted, although a draft is out for consultation. Some partnerships are also not used to maximum effect or formally evaluated. Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area.
- 36 The leader provides strong leadership to the council. The relationship between councillors and senior officers is positive, with good informal communication. Both councillors and officers are clear about the corporate priorities and their roles and accountabilities for performance improvements in key services. However, non-executive councillors are not enabled to contribute effectively to the management of the council. To be more effective they require better information, additional training and support on project and performance management. Their meetings are not delivering effective control and scrutiny of the council's business.
- 37 The council has excellent financial capacity to fund its priorities. It has an open approach to procurement which is demonstrated by contractual partnerships for the delivery of several of its key services. It has good relationships with its contractors and is working with them to deliver improvements to the quality of services.
- 38 Partnerships are well established. The council enjoys good relationships with registered social landlords (RSLs), the county council and other councils in south Worcestershire. These partnerships are seen as important to delivering key initiatives in e-government and leisure services. It has identified opportunities to jointly commission and deliver services with neighbouring councils for building control service and this is the catalyst for joint working initiatives in other services such as environmental health, refuse collection and recycling. The Market Towns Initiative partnerships have also successfully delivered positive outcomes for the people of Wychavon.
- 39 However, the council recognises that partnerships are not always used to maximum effect or formally evaluated. There are tensions in some of the partnerships, such as the Highways Partnership Unit, and the output from others

has been limited as evidenced by the time taken to provide a hostel for people with mental illness or a women's refuge.

- 40 Although the council can point to a number of positive examples of a coordinated approach to strategic priorities, the approach to equality issues is not coordinated. There is no strong consideration of equality issues in decision making at a corporate level beyond rural inclusion and ensuring similar levels of service in Wychavon's three main towns. The council does not yet have a race equalities strategy in place, despite the requirement for it to have been adopted by May 2002. However, at a service delivery level the council has several targeted initiatives being undertaken such as an arts project with travellers and an Asian arts and food festival.
- 41 The workforce is relatively stable and there is limited staff turnover. The staff survey showed high staff satisfaction. There has been a range of new senior staff brought in which are already achieving improvements. These include enhanced corporate capacity at a senior level.
- 42 Staff capacity is variable across the council. The lack of capacity is also cited as the primary reason for projects not being completed. The council acknowledges that there is limited capacity in some parts of the council to take on additional development. Work is currently underway to address the issue of succession planning. The council has only recently adopted a human resource strategy and is reviewing human resource policies however practices are yet to be embedded throughout the organisation.

Performance management

- 43 Performance management in Wychavon is developing. The council has adopted a revised performance management framework which supports its recently adopted Ps & Ps. The system has simplified the number of indicators reported to councillors and senior officers and seeks to relate to the core priorities. Financial and capital management is strong with corporate management improving but this is yet to be embedded at service level. Budgetary control is strong but changes are needed to the calculation of base budget in order to more accurately reflect anticipated spending. There are a number of informal reporting mechanisms which have informed some members but there are risks to this informal process. At a service level, corporate priorities have not yet consistently been translated into monitored service actions. Weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area.
- 44 The council has made progress in developing its approach to managing service performance and improvement. It has focused its efforts on managing a smaller number of performance indicators that relate to its core priorities. This is helping to focus managers' attention to service delivery. The council's key promises are now allocated to individual executive councillors and senior managers and this helps make clear where responsibility for success or failure lies. The Ps & Ps are part of the executive board's work plan with progress reported to the executive board every six months and to the public.
- 45 Another strand of the framework is in positively managing the performance of others that deliver on behalf of the council, including contractors such as the Leisure Trust where annual performance is included in the contract monitoring arrangements.

- 46 The council has had good performance management of its finances and capital management. It has also introduced a system for the management of its assets. There are a number of one year short term goals and targets in place which it monitors. Corporate management of performance has improved but this is yet to be fully embedded into services. Improving services have developed better performance management which needs to be implemented consistently across the council.
- 47 Due to the variable performance management, some failures in services were not identified until they happened, although the council then demonstrated its ability to concentrate its efforts on improvement.
- 48 Good readable performance information is reported to the public by way of the council's document 'Reach for the Stars' and 'The Wychavon Magazine'. Key performance indicators are also reported to the executive and senior management team every six months. However, the senior management team should have more frequent reporting in order to quickly identify problems and take remedial action if required. There is also no scrutiny involvement in monitoring performance. The council, therefore, has limited evidence that it takes remedial action when performance information identifies plans not on target, for example the introduction of new IT.
- 49 The culture of the organisation is based on 'we do it but we don't write it down'. The council also has a system of regularly reviewing progress informally and formally through progress reports on specific projects, to joint member and officer meetings. At the service level, corporate priorities have not yet been translated into service objectives and promises are in the main not outcome focused. Therefore, there is a lack of clarity that would enable councillors and managers to monitor achievements.
- 50 Councillors pride themselves on balancing the budget and keeping expenditure low. Budgetary control is strong but changes are needed to the calculation of base budget in order to more accurately reflect anticipated spending. At present, the council over estimates budget requirements on an annual basis. However, as the council over estimates there are underspends (usually in staffing budgets) and indeed in the last two years contributions have been made to reserves.
- 51 Despite there being some examples where risk identification is developing, for example in implementing e-Government, formal risk management is not yet embedded in the organisation and there is limited robust risk analysis of major projects at senior management or member level. The council has also recognised that it needs to assess contractual risk for externalised services.
- 52 Staff appraisals are undertaken but are not sufficiently focused on achieving corporate objectives. Staff have annual 'appraisals' with six-monthly reviews. However, staff targets are generally not measurable or link back to achieving the council's corporate objectives. Managers and members are less clear about their accountability for the quality or performance improvements in the day to day service and how they demonstrate this achievement.

What has the council achieved/not achieved to date?

Achievement

- 53 The council has had a positive record of achievement over the last two years with an emphasis being put on the three corporate priorities. There have been a number of projects over the past three years which have enhanced the environment and economy of the town centres, whilst developing enhanced accessibility in the rural areas. Of the key 36 performance indicators, 21 had shown an improvement and four had remained the same, whilst 11 had declined. This has led to a high overall satisfaction rate of residents for services delivered by the council. It has proved capable of making significant improvements for the people of Wychavon, such as in planning and schemes for flood alleviation but has been less successful in housing. Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area.
- 54 Overall, the council provides a good level of services with which people are satisfied. In 38 indicators of service performance, Wychavon is rated as above average in 24 of them, compared to other councils. 21 have also improved since last year and four have remained the same. The commitment made by the council to keep council tax increases to a maximum of 2.5 per cent has been consistent and achieved over the last three years.
- 55 The council measures itself against its key priorities and has shown that the general trend of achievement is one of improvement, including:

A well managed council

- ◆ Residents' overall satisfaction has improved (amongst top performing councils).
- ◆ Increase in per cent of council tax collected (now amongst top performing councils).
- ◆ Increase in NNDR collected (moved from bottom quartile to second quartile).
- ◆ Reduction in sickness absence (moved from third quartile to second quartile).
- ◆ Improving benefits cases processed correctly (top quartile).
- ◆ Improved renewal benefits claims on time.
- ◆ Increase in speed of dealing with planning applications and satisfaction (49 per cent in 2000/01 to over 75 per cent in 2001/02 – bottom to top quartile).

A healthy and safe environment

- ◆ Increase in household waste recycled.
- ◆ Increase in the proportion of the population who live within one mile of a recycling facility or have a kerbside collection.
- ◆ Improvements to the Droitwich canal in conjunction with partners.
- ◆ 18 flood alleviation schemes identified and funded (£750,000) and 12 have been completed in three years, with four further planned for 2003.
- ◆ Improved the provision of leisure facilities.

- ◆ Redeveloped Pershore Leisure Centre and re-opened in July 2002.
- ◆ Projects to reduce the fear of crime including installed CCTV cameras.
- ◆ Street cleaning has amongst the highest levels of public satisfaction.
- ◆ Most public space services at comparatively low cost compared to other district councils.
- ◆ Target to remove fly tips within 24 hours and often done quicker.
- ◆ Implemented a secure car park scheme for the safety of users and vehicles (recognised with a national award).

A prosperous economy

- ◆ Extension of the concessionary bus fare system to achieve better accessibility in rural areas.
- ◆ Enhanced the town centres by joint funding of projects which stimulates the local economy.
- ◆ Created 41 local jobs through grants to set-up businesses.
- ◆ New system of business grants: for example, 46 new business start-up grants & seven grants to support established businesses.
- ◆ Support for five village retail and village post offices.
- ◆ Three regeneration projects, such as Abbey Park / river bank in Evesham.
- ◆ Use of brownfield sites and housing densities increasing.

56 However, there are areas where performance is not improving and the council will need to seek to resolve these issues if it is to continue to deliver on its priorities, these include:

- ◆ Cost of benefit claims and average time to calculate new benefit claims (although 2nd quartile).
- ◆ Public satisfaction in parks and open spaces.
- ◆ The council's annual promise to 'make funding available for 100 affordable homes' in 2002/03 will not be met as only 72 are likely to be completed this year. In the last three years this has represented only 11 per cent (190) of all new homes.

57 The council has also completed a number of other improvements including:

58 The council has invested in providing high quality local access to services. The council has developed council 'shops' in the towns of Pershore, Evesham and Droitwich. Public satisfaction with the One Stop Shops is high and has shown that these have been successful. The increase accessibility to services included those run by the county council. The council's innovative approach to e-government has also enabled these shops to function more effectively. The council has now developed outreach one stop facilities in the more rural areas of the district where access to one of the main towns may be more difficult.

59 The refuse collection service is valued by local people with 90 per cent of people satisfied with the service, but it does not encourage waste minimisation. (Wychavon collects comparatively more rubbish per household than similar district councils and this rate is growing at faster than the national average). The

service covers a large geographical area to which the council has historically provided a back door, black sack collection with no restriction on the amount of household waste it will take away. In addition, the council has provided a free bulky waste collection and a free collection of garden waste.

- 60 There has been some improvement in the recycling rate over the past three years. However, despite this increasing trend Wychavon's improvements saw the council slip from amongst the top performing district councils for recycling to the second quartile.
- 61 In housing, the council has achieved some successes in balancing the local housing needs but these have been less than aimed for and are results of ad-hoc initiatives when a more strategic intervention could have achieved more. The development of new homes has exceeded local plan development rates, but the provision of affordable homes has been low and the 2002/03 target for affordable homes will not be met. Private sector grants are under spent by over a third and they are not targeted to those in need.
- 62 Although it is not meeting the needs to provide affordable homes for local people, it has completed some initiatives in the housing service that have helped improve access to affordable housing, including a homebuy scheme and local lettings schemes in three villages.
- 63 There has been a clear and consistent focus at officer level to improve the planning service – it is now the fastest improving planning service in England. There is a focus on updating the local plan, which reflects the different housing needs across the district and seeks to direct development to address these needs.

Investment

- 64 The council has the basis of strong building blocks to secure future improvements. It has strong and prudent capital management, a successful approach to procurement, effective IT and successful informal human resource practices. However, the council recognises that it needs to adopt a more formal approach to risk management and human resource strategies. The role of scrutiny is underdeveloped and there is limited evidence of robust challenge to the executive board. Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area.
- 65 The council has successful financial management and has used this as one of the main building blocks in managing change in the organisation. The council also uses consultation as a building block, informing the direction of the priorities. The council opens itself to external challenge, with examples including:
- ◆ Public Forums and Resident Panels – leading to changes to the local plan and improvements to Abbey Park.
 - ◆ Involvement in benchmarking club – leading to sharing of qualitative and quantitative information.
 - ◆ Best value review areas chosen in line with low satisfaction rates.
- 66 IT resources are used for the direct benefit of users and support services, with strong business cases needing to be put forward to justify IT investments. The

council is also taking forward the e-government agenda both internally and in partnership with the Worcestershire e-government partnership. The service centre now handles around 60 per cent of all calls, there is an accessible web site and credit and debit facilities are coming on-line.

- 67 A number of more informal practices in management of staffing resources have been successful. The council has obtained IIP accreditation, implemented the action plan and achieved re-accreditation. Corporate health indicators – staff turnover, sickness absence, ill health and early retirements – are all improving and the staff survey ‘Working for Wychavon’ in 2001 produced positive results, with 85 per cent of staff enjoying their job with a sense of personal achievement as the main motivator.
- 68 The council recognises it needed to develop a human resources strategy and proactively manage emerging capacity problems to achieve its Ps & Ps through the development of the workforce, in line with medium-term organisational needs. Strategic capacity is being developed at a senior management level with the realignment of community safety, sustainability and health issues to the strategy and communications section to ensure these cross cutting issues become more integral to all the work being done across the council.
- 69 The council has adopted a risk management strategy; however, there is as yet no consistent approach to risk management and therefore the council is in the process of formalising risk management in plans, including reference in this year’s service plans.
- 70 Key strategic documents recently produced set out how performance will be managed and monitored, examples being the capital strategy, asset management plan, procurement strategy and our people strategy. Project management is developing but skills need to be shared across the organisation. The council stated that it had established some cross service unit groups for finance and personnel issues but needed to extend skill sharing.
- 71 The role of scrutiny is underdeveloped and there is limited evidence of robust challenge to the executive board. The scrutiny role does not help the council stay focused on what it is trying to achieve or have a complimentary role for the executive by considering key issues before decisions are made. It is not part of the current role of scrutiny to be involved in performance monitoring or plan monitoring except in the area of best value reviews where there is good member involvement. Scrutiny committee is not provided with sufficient information to assess the council’s performance or determine options. There is no evidence that the scrutiny function is providing an effective challenge to the executive board, no board decisions have ever been called in by scrutiny.
- 72 The council has invested in a programme of capital spending both directly and by securing grants from other agencies. It has secured external funding including £1million in market towns initiative funding through Advantage West Midlands and a share of £100,000 from DEFRA to jointly run a mobile recycling scheme in the rural areas. The council has also been successful in providing money for projects and initiatives which have then resulted in significant investments being made by other agencies, including providing around £300,000 for community projects which then attracted £3million of additional funding.

In the light of what the council has learned to date, what does it plan to do next?

Learning

- 73 Wychavon District Council is keen to improve, listens to the views of the public and others, is willing to innovate and will look to outside partners to help it deliver. It is prepared to change; however, as the council considers it is delivering a high standard of service, it is sometimes complacent and some lack motivation to deliver continual improvement to services. There are no formal systems in place to ensure lessons learned are captured and disseminated throughout the council. There is a lack of learning from partnerships. Due to good service standards the council has said 'we can feel complacent', which can result in improvement sometimes only following weaknesses being highlighted from external reporting. The council is beginning to be receptive to learning however weaknesses significantly outweigh strengths.
- 74 The council's self assessment demonstrated an awareness of some of the areas that need to be developed, for example performance management, succession planning and risk management, particularly in the area of contractual risk. It also recognises where it has under performed and needs to improve – such as a delay of several months in completing the Pershore Leisure Centre. It recognised that race equalities work was progressing slowly; however, it did not identify the need to embed work required in social inclusion. There is also no structured approach to learning from across the council and there is a risk that the maximum benefit will not be gained, particularly from evaluating major projects and partnerships.
- 75 The council recognises that its scrutiny functions are weak, but is unwilling to make changes before the next round of elections. There is also a concern that as the council considers it is delivering a high standard of service, it is complacent and lacks motivation to deliver significant improvement to services. Although the council is prepared to change, due to a belief in the quality of its own services, it is not open to learning from other councils and is sometimes complacent and some lack motivation to deliver continual improvement to services
- 76 The council acts swiftly and deliberately once it is made aware of a need to improve services, for example in two years the council has transformed its planning services from amongst the worst performing in the country to amongst the best performing. It has also made additional resources available to environmental health services in order to respond to new statutory duties and improve services overall. The council has also sort to bring in expertise by way of recent recruitment.
- 77 The council has learnt from the previous local plan and improved it. Developments are concentrated on 'sustainable' villages and distributed across the district – despite this distribution being in contravention to the county structure plan. The planning service is now self aware and has now brought in new staff to improve the service.
- 78 The council has responded to the findings of the best value inspections of information technology and building control and has implemented improvements

in both services. It has chosen services for future review by identifying those where public satisfaction is lower. In addition, the council revised its approach to local performance indicators when both the external auditor and members indicated that having a system that involved 188 different indicators was not useful and was not driving improvement. The asset management plan was rated as poor and had to be refocused. The council addressed the issues of concern within a three month period.

- 79 The council does not formally evaluate its progress in all activities. For example, there has been no formal assessment of the 1998 / 2001 community safety strategy or progress against the sustainability strategy in 2001/02. In addition, there is no formal evaluation of the outcomes of awards under the community grants scheme or the impact of the 30 or more partnerships that Wychavon has entered into. Also, in some services, the lack of robust performance information is limited.
- 80 The housing service lacks capacity and does not proactively plan for the future. The council has changed the way in which it plans to fund affordable housing but has not assessed the impact of this change. The grant system for private sector grants will change from July 2003 to give the council more discretion how it chooses to direct its grants. The council has not yet begun to consider the future options for private sector housing grants, and has yet to identify any proposals that will meet local needs.

Future plans

- 81 The council has a number of short and medium term plans to deliver improvements for the people of Wychavon. The existing financial strategy is robust and the council recognises it needs to be updated to reflect future corporate priorities and community planning. However, some key plans are not yet in place nor have a clear plan for delivery. The council also recognises that despite now having clear priorities in the short and medium term, future planning for services is mixed and needs to be tied into the new Ps & Ps. Project management is weak and equality and diversity issues are not clearly addressed. Weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area.
- 82 The council has a robust financial strategy and has made links to the Ps & Ps. However, it recognises that it needs to be updated to encompass recent changes in the finance system. Work is also being done to strengthen options in the capital strategy for 2003/04.
- 83 The council recognises that future planning for services is mixed and there are certain key issues for which it does not yet have firm plans to address, for example:
- ◆ How equality and diversity issues will be embedded into the work of the council.
 - ◆ How the LSPs will deliver the community plan and engage with the Worcestershire countywide community plan.
 - ◆ How to improve the quality of its housing strategy to identify and address the housing needs of the district.
 - ◆ How the revenue implications for waste management will be met.

- 84 Wychavon and its partners have produced a community plan which is out for consultation. The community plan is shortly to be adopted and will help the council develop a long term future vision for Wychavon. The council then needs to develop a SMART plan to ensure delivery of the community plan with all partners knowing what role they play and ensure the links to the council's priorities.
- 85 However, because Wychavon was slow to become engaged with the process, the county wide draft community plan has already been produced and the LSP in Wychavon lost some opportunity to influence this plan.
- 86 The housing strategy does not address some of the key housing issues or identify a path to significant improvement in a poorly performing area and the LA21 plan is not being systematically and proactively monitored to ensure it is being delivered.
- 87 Key projects have not been delivered on time due to poor project management and lack of a formal mechanism to keep projects on track. For example, the delay in delivery of the Preferred Partner Charter, intended to get the best from work with RSLs.

Appendix 1 - Conduct of the inspection

- 88 The corporate assessment of the council's proven capacity to improve was carried out under the Local Government Act 1999. Local councils have a general duty under Section 3 of this act to secure continuous improvement in the exercise of their functions. Section 10 gives the Audit Commission the power to inspect councils' performance of the general duty of improvement.
- 89 The assessment took place in Wychavon District council over the period from 14th October to 29th November 2002 and was based on two thematic inspections. The assessment team was led by the Audit Commission and comprised of five inspectors.
- 90 The council's own self-assessment provided the focus for the main part of the inspection. The assessment team discussed and challenged the self-assessment statement with the authority alongside existing performance data on the council. This determined the scope of on-site fieldwork which included:
- ◆ Interviews with council officers and members.
 - ◆ Meetings with external partners and other stakeholders including the Government office.
 - ◆ Focus groups with citizens, users, council staff and members.
 - ◆ Review of key documentation.
 - ◆ Observation of officer and member meetings
 - ◆ Case studies on local priorities
- 91 The report has been discussed with the local authority, which has been given the opportunity to examine the Audit Commission's assessment. This in turn will contribute to the Comprehensive Performance Assessment.