

Corporate Assessment Report

December 2007



Corporate Assessment

Castle Point Borough Council

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Introduction

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

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

- Ambition.
- Prioritisation.

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

- Capacity.
- Performance management.

What has been achieved?

- Achievement and Improvement.

Executive summary

- 3 Castle Point Borough Council has made significant progress since being categorised as 'poor' in 2004 turning many areas of weakness into corporate strengths. It is now a 'good' Council. This has been possible through strong and effective political and officer leadership. The rate of improvement has compelled tough decisions. These have been taken despite, on occasions, being locally unpopular. Key services delivered to some of the potentially most vulnerable groups are performing well. Effective partnership working is delivering clear outcomes, particularly in areas of regeneration and in tackling health inequalities. Progress is such that the Government's monitoring board, put in place to support the Council, is now looking to return responsibility for monitoring progress back to the Council. This demonstrates the progress achieved in providing good and reliable services to the community.
- 4 The Council has developed a comprehensive strategic vision and established clear corporate priorities that address community expectations. The Council and its partners have a shared, clear long-term vision for the Borough. This is based on a good understanding of the nature and scale of the issues faced. Strong links exist between all high-level plans and strategies and priorities cascade down to individual staff. Partners are clear about their responsibilities and have assigned activities and targets to them.
- 5 Political and managerial leadership respect one another. Both councillors and senior managers provide a clear lead to staff and partners. Relationships between councillors and officers are effective and there is climate of openness and support at all levels. Councillors are fully engaged in service planning and member champions have supported the transition from silo working to corporate working. The introduction of new democratic arrangements in January 2008 further place the Council well to address remaining weakness such as to improve the challenge aspect of scrutiny to improve the delivery of services.
- 6 There has been significant improvement in performance management arrangements. This has followed considerable investment in a framework and cultural change within the Council to ensure it is effective. However, some aspects are not consistently and robustly applied at all levels in the organisation. Service planning is too complex and target setting inconsistent. It is too early for the new performance management arrangements in some partnerships to demonstrate clear outcomes for the local community.
- 7 Human resource capacity has been a limiting factor at stages during the improvement process; this has on occasions limited the pace of progress. For example, in developing and applying some strategies. Capacity has however, been significantly increased through effective recruitment and successfully tackling the previously high sickness levels. Effective partnerships have further improved capacity. However, effective succession planning is not yet in place in this lean organisation and challenges are faced such as the possible transfer of the housing stock to a registered social landlord.

- 8 Services have improved considerably, with many now being of a high standard. Some key front-line services were among the worst performing nationally in 2003. These services are now among the highest performing and are delivering customer focused and responsive services to the community. The benefits service is an example where a high quality standard is provided to potentially vulnerable people. Improvements have been made across all priority areas and are effectively tackling those issues important to the Borough. Even long-term ambitions such as regeneration are already realising clear outcomes. Increasing satisfaction reported in surveys has accompanied service improvement and partners view the Council as effective in delivering services.

Areas for improvement

- 9 Performance management, although improved significantly since the previous CPA, needs further refining to support the effective delivery of the corporate priorities. As performance management becomes increasingly applied and part of the culture systems need to be more user friendly and support delivery rather than being a significant process in their own right. Target setting is an important area for development which, although improving, still remains a weakness in some areas.
- 10 The Council needs to develop a comprehensive approach to work force planning. It is a lean organisation and the rate of improvement has on occasions been limited through not having the staff to deliver its ambitious agenda. Consideration needs to be given to the staffing needs of delivering services in different ways such as through joint working and partnerships. The potential transfer of the housing stock offers the opportunity to further ensure that capacity is aligned to the delivery of corporate ambitions.

Summary of assessment scores

Headline questions	Theme	Score*	Weighted score
What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?	Ambition	3	6
	Prioritisation	3	6
What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?	Capacity	2	4
	Performance management	2	4
What has been achieved?	Achievement and Improvement	3	21
Weighted score			41
CPA category			Good

*Key to scores			
1 – below minimum requirements – inadequate performance 2 – at only minimum requirements – adequate performance 3 – consistently above minimum requirements – performing well 4 – well above minimum requirements – performing strongly			

****Banding thresholds for determining CPA category**

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

Context

The locality

- 11 Castle Point Borough Council is situated in south east Essex and covers 4,488 hectares bordering the northern side of the Thames Estuary. There are four main towns: South Benfleet; Thundersley; Hadleigh; and Canvey Island. Outside these settlements the metropolitan green belt, which covers 87 per cent of the Borough, protects the area from significant development.
- 12 The Borough is 20 minutes drive from the M25 and has the benefit of frequent train services to London. The Council is the largest employer, employing over 300 staff. Proximity to London and the lack of local quality employment has resulted in high levels of commuting with 62 per cent of the population working outside the Borough. There are also high commuting rates out of the Borough for leisure activities such as entertainment and shopping.
- 13 There is a population of approximately 87,000 living in 35,700 dwellings. The population is relatively stable and the over 55 age group is growing. At 24.3 per cent, the proportion of the population of pensionable age is higher than the national average of 20.8 per cent. Twenty per cent of the population are young people. Residents from an ethnic minority background make up 3.35 per cent of the population. This is below the national average of 13 per cent, and has increased from 1.2 per cent since 1991. Over 7,000 households in the Borough have a person with a disability.
- 14 Overall the Borough ranks 245 out of 354 (where 1 is the most deprived) on the indices of deprivation (2004). Although overall the area is not deprived there are pockets of deprivation such as on parts of Canvey Island. There are also health inequalities in the Borough with life expectancy lower in some wards, including some wards on Canvey Island. Educational attainment levels across the Borough are lower than the regional averages, particularly in relation to higher educational attainment and professional qualifications.
- 15 House prices are close to the national average and below that for the East of England. About 94 per cent of dwellings are either owner occupied or in the private rented sector. The Council currently retains 1500 homes (4.5 per cent), mainly built after 1945; recent investment has seen 80 per cent currently meeting the decent home standard. The remaining 1.5 per cent of homes are under the ownership of a registered social landlord (RSL).
- 16 The Borough is part of the Thames Gateway South Essex area that is a government priority for regeneration. The Castle Point Regeneration Partnership, comprising of partners within the Gateway, has been set up to address regeneration issues in the Borough. The aims of regeneration include the need to address the high levels of commuting out of the Borough for work through better coordinated development of employment areas.

- 17 The Council has a number of key partners including other Essex councils, particularly Essex County Council. In addition the Police and Primary Care Trust are central to delivery of corporate and shared objectives.

The Council

- 18 There has been a Conservative administration since May 2003, currently consisting of 26 out of 41 Councillors with the remaining 15 being Canvey Island Independents. Prior to this the Labour party had been in control since 1995.
- 19 The Council operates through a 'fourth option' committee system with four policy committees including an improvement committee which has most of the powers of the full Council. The other committees cover policy and resources; community and environment. An overview and scrutiny committee has an audit role as well as a review role supporting the work of the policy committees. The Council has plans in place to move to an Executive (Leader and Cabinet) model in early 2008.
- 20 The Council has established five neighbourhood areas mirroring electoral divisions. Neighbourhood meetings for each area are held regularly and are a key driver of service improvement. Each neighbourhood has a funded action plan, and the meetings are attended and chaired by local councillors regardless of political affiliation.
- 21 A parish council for Canvey Island was formally constituted in May 2007. The Council is working closely with the new parish to help develop its new members and has provided a range of support. This includes assisting with the successful election process and providing guidance, training and assistance in recruitment. The new parish council has a budget of approximately £267,000 and a clerk was appointed in September 2007.
- 22 Castle Point Borough Council has a chief executive and four corporate directors, who together form the executive management team. There are two service directorates and two support directorates.
- 23 The Council employs 307.5 full-time equivalent staff. The revenue budget for 2007/08 is £12.5 million. The average increase in council tax over the last three years has been 2.5 per cent which is significantly below inflation. The Council continually maintains a balanced budget and is debt free and has adequate reserves of approximately £1 million. It has prudent financial management arrangements in place.
- 24 Castle Point Borough Council had its comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) in 2004 and was rated 'poor'. Since then the Council has been subject to monitoring and support by a Monitoring Board. This has representation from the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG), the local Government Office and the Audit Commission.

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

Ambition

- 25 The Council is performing well in this area. The Council and its partners have a clear shared long-term vision for the Borough which addresses community expectations. This is based on a good understanding of the nature and scale of the issues faced, particularly with regards to the diverse and vulnerable communities, such as the ageing population, that are present. Significant improvements have been made in clarifying the strategic aims of the Council, and its role within partnerships has strengthened considerably since the previous CPA. There are strong links between the local area agreement, the sustainable community strategy and the corporate plan. Partners are clear about their responsibilities and have their own agreed activities and targets. Senior officers and councillors are demonstrating strong and effective community leadership.
- 26 The Council is a key player in the local strategic partnership (LSP), which is chaired by the Leader. The LSP sets out a clear strategic direction which is closely aligned to local area agreement priorities. The Council shows clear leadership and partners report that the LSP performs strongly when compared to other LSPs in the region. Following a refresh in 2005, key public and voluntary sector agencies, private sector bodies and community representatives are effectively engaged. The LSP's long-term Sustainable Community Strategy 2007-2021 is supported by nine focused ambitions and is underpinned by a five-year medium term action plan. Outcome based targets are in place supporting the delivery of the actions, such as reducing child obesity. Responsibilities for each partner are clearly set out and they are committed to deliver the strategy. Closely aligning the work of all partners places the Council well to deliver against the key challenges within the Borough.
- 27 The corporate plan sets the Council's aims and objectives for the Borough and it is explicitly linked to the sustainable community strategy. The LSP and the Council has an overall vision for Castle Point as 'a community where everyone can prosper, be safe and live in a high quality environment'. The corporate plan is underpinned with four priorities.
- Environment - Civic Pride.
 - Regeneration and Homes.
 - Improving the Council.
 - Community Safety.

The plan contains long-term targets up to 2012 and shorter term more focused key objectives for the current year. For example, under the 'improving the Council' theme the target is to have all priority performance indicators for service delivery in the best performing 25 per cent by 2012. Short-term targets include having in place a customer relationship management system for all key services by March 2008. However, despite underpinning plans having challenging targets these are not consistently clearly reflected in high-level strategies. For example the street scene service plan has an annual target to increase the rate of recycling to 45 per cent by 2012 but the corporate plan only refers to a target to 'increase recycling and composting'. Without articulating clearly ambitions and targets it is difficult for partners and local people to quantify what the Council is aiming to achieve.

- 28 There is a long-term challenging vision for regeneration for the Borough based on a comprehensive understanding of local needs. Regeneration aims include environmental enhancements and the need for quality employment opportunities to reduce the current high levels of commuting out of the Borough for work. Activity is centred on deprived areas, such as Canvey Island, and is closely linked to the sub regional regeneration agenda. The Council made a strategic decision to establish the Castle Point Regeneration Partnership to drive long-term regeneration. Strong leadership is demonstrated with the leader chairing the partnership. Although it is a small Borough, the Council is a key member of the wider Thames Gateway South Essex Regeneration Partnership. A high-level regeneration framework is in place covering the period 2007-2012. A five-year delivery plan supports the framework. Essex County Council has demonstrated commitment to the importance of this partnership by funding the key position of regeneration manager within the Borough. The Council has positioned itself well to deliver long-term regeneration ambitions both through its own initiatives and through partnership working at the highest level.
- 29 The Council's vision and priorities have been derived through effective targeted consultation and engagement. A clear corporate approach to consultation which is coordinated between service areas is now in place although some delays are experienced in complaint handling. All consultation takes diversity and equality issues into account. Service specific consultation involves both using feedback forms and focus groups. The improved quarterly Borough newspaper has ensured the public are aware of the Council's priorities. Five neighbourhood forums, which meet quarterly, provide effective channels for engaging and consulting with the local community. Funded action plans are in place for each of the neighbourhoods and attendance is improving, assisted for example with councillors distributing leaflets. This, with a refresh of the citizen's panel, is helping the Council to develop a clearer understanding of the distinct communities found in the Borough. Partners report the Council has a good understanding of its community. Successful community engagement is supporting the council in developing its priorities for the Borough.

Prioritisation

- 30 The Council is performing well in this area. Clear priorities are in place to address the important issues facing the Borough, the needs of its communities as well as national objectives. The Council is taking a comprehensive approach to delivering improvement now the initial priorities and focus provided by the external Monitoring Board are either completed or are progressing well. The Council is clear what is, and what is not, a priority. Tough decisions have been taken to ensure focus and delivery. Underpinning plans and strategies are in place. Partnerships are effective in supporting Council priorities and shared objectives. The Council is therefore well-placed to build on the improvements achieved so far.
- 31 The Council has clearly focused on short-term improvement priorities to address those service areas which were poor performing. Three key services areas were prioritised under the guidance of the Monitoring Board: the benefits service; leisure and housing functions. A programme of improvement has been largely delivered with some key services to some vulnerable communities, such as the benefits service, now high performing. As a result of the improvement in these areas the Council is now focusing on delivery of wider corporate priorities developed through consultation.
- 32 There is a sharp focus on areas of importance to local people. The current corporate priorities have been revised following effective consultation and engagement with the community and key stakeholders. Consultation identified the top priorities for residents as: clean streets (19 per cent); feeling safer (18 per cent), and protecting the green belt (14 per cent). The priorities are closely aligned to meet local and national demands covering both the short and long-term. This has improved focus. In the Audit Commission's stakeholder survey the Council scored very highly for its understanding of the challenges facing the locality and for having clear priorities that address local need. One of the four key priorities now in place is to improve the Council. This demonstrates a balancing of the need to improve front-line services with the need to continue the momentum of internal improvement.
- 33 The Council works well with partners to deliver shared priorities. There are clear roles and responsibilities within partnerships. In the LSP, lead agencies are assigned responsibility for the delivery of the nine ambitions. Castle Point is leading the ambition for 'making our environment greener and cleaner'. Clarity over the delivery of priorities provides accountability and improves the ability of all partners to focus their resources on what is important locally.
- 34 The Council is clear about its priority and non priority areas. Consultation has informed priority areas and what the Council will not focus on such as maintaining some underused and ill-equipped play areas. Councillors and officers at all levels are very aware of the priorities and their contribution to them. Priorities cascade through to service plans and individual's personal development plans. The Council is therefore well placed to deliver what is important to local people.

- 35** Plans and strategies underpin priority areas. There are strong links from high level strategies, such as the sustainable community strategy, through to service plans. In addition there are strong links between strategies and the medium term financial strategy. Resources are aligned to priorities and the Council has moved expenditure to support what it is trying to achieve. For example, spending has been diverted from events such as the Castle Point Show to the provision of front-line services, such as recycling. Integrated and financed plans and strategies increase the prospect of delivering corporate priorities.
- 36** Plans and strategies are generally supported with robust short and long-term targets at a service level. Targets are mostly challenging and outcome focused. For example, the Council aims to maintain the standard of street cleaning in the best performing 25 per cent of councils nationally. Diversity and equality issues are integrated effectively into all service plans. Services are structured to meet the needs of vulnerable groups such as leisure services meeting the health needs of older people. The Council therefore has a clear focus to deliver services to meet the needs its communities and ensure that they are targeted at vulnerable groups.
- 37** Tough decisions have been taken to drive the improvement agenda. Some of these tough decisions have been locally unpopular but the Council has remained resolute in the overall aim of improving services. For example a proactive approach is taken to find alternative ways of delivering services such as delivery of some leisure services. Decisions have included to cease providing some facilities such as the Council owned bars and transferring the ownership of some community halls. Taking difficult decisions supports the delivery of corporate priorities and has provided momentum in improving the way the Council works.
- 38** The Council learns from its actions and from others. There is a proactive approach to share best practice through departmental and management meetings. In addition the Council is open and learns from initiatives that have been less successful such as consultation with those who commute out of the Borough by train for work. It learns from others, for example peer members from other councils took part in the ward walkabouts with councillors as part of the development of neighbourhood action plans. External inspection and peer review is acted on promptly - many of the areas of weaknesses reported by the peer review were addressed in time for this CPA. The learning culture now in place supports the continued improvement of services across all areas.

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

Capacity

- 39 The Council is performing adequately in this area. Political and managerial leadership is widely respected with councillors and senior managers providing a clear lead to staff and partners. The Council uses partnership working effectively to increase capacity. Relationships between councillors and officers are effective and there is climate of openness, support and mutual respect at all levels. Financial and risk management and the Council's approach to value for money are adequate. Reserves are in place and the Council is debt free. Overview and scrutiny is not sufficiently effective and has yet to demonstrate impact on improving outcomes for local people. Workforce management is effective but succession planning targeted to minimise risk is not being fully addressed.
- 40 Political and managerial leadership is widely respected, clear and appropriately strong. A clear direction is provided to both staff and partners. The Chief Executive and leader have an effective working relationship and are visible within the Council. The senior management team and councillors work well together on cross-cutting issues. Member champions are in place to give a political lead on cross-cutting issues such as diversity, performance management and customer focus. Staff are focused, dedicated and consider the organisation to be open and supportive with mutual respect at all levels. The Council's culture is supporting the continued improvement of services and is significantly more robust than at the time of the CPA 2004.
- 41 The approach to partnership working is strong and enthusiastic. There are high-level strategic partnerships that are very effective such as the Castle Point Regeneration Partnership. Capacity is strengthened through shared member and officer training and delivery of shared services such as internal audit. Some services are jointly delivered such as the investigation out of hours noise complaints with Basildon BC. The Council's good use of partnerships is successfully increasing its capacity to deliver its priorities.
- 42 Decision-making arrangements are generally sound. The weaknesses in the 'fourth option' structure have been recognised and the Council has decided to move to a leader and cabinet model from January 2008. The Council has already enhanced the effectiveness of the committee structure through the changes made to planning committee. Strategic planning has been separated from development control enabling a speedier decision making process, and placing strategic planning with regeneration which is a key corporate and partnership priority. Increasing the effectiveness of decision making supports the Council to achieve its ambitions and priorities.

- 43 The Council manages its finances effectively. It has a sound medium term financial strategy with spending plans and estimates closely aligned to support priorities. It clearly identifies the links and implications of other key strategies such as the human resource strategy, capital strategy and asset management plan. To ensure that budget allocations closely link to the priorities, an assessment process is used to align revenue development bids against priorities. The Council's key priorities are appropriately financed within a sound planning and delivery framework.
- 44 The approach to procurement is improving and is realising efficiency savings. As a member of a procurement hub since September 2006, the Council has procured goods and services jointly with other councils. This includes temporary agency staff, computer hardware, refuse vehicles and biodegradable waste sacks. The savings identified from the procurement of these, and other contracts, have already accrued to over £80,000 for the financial year 2006/07. The Council is currently negotiating a joint agreement on behalf of the hub for playground equipment. Effective procurement is delivering efficiency savings that are reinvested into front-line services.
- 45 The Council's approach to risk management is robust. A comprehensive risk management strategy is in place setting out the framework for the management of risks and is linked to corporate and service planning. The operational management group closely monitors operational risks and departmental risk registers. The executive management team maintains the corporate risk register. The corporate risk register identifies and mitigates risks such as the impact on the budget in light of large-scale voluntary transfer (LSVT) of the housing stock. Committee reports highlight the risks associated with decisions. Training has been delivered to officers and councillors. A member champion helps ensure risk has a high-profile and that risk management arrangements are robust. The Council is therefore able to identify key risks that it faces and implement steps to reduce the potential negative impact.
- 46 Human resource management is effectively managed although succession planning is undeveloped. The Council has comprehensively tackled high sickness absence through robust yet supportive systems. This has included successfully outsourcing some aspects of sickness management. There has been a 28 per cent reduction in 2006/07 from the 13.39 days lost per employee in 2005/06, to an (unaudited) 7.7 days up to September 2007. Recruitment and retention is supported both through market supplements and incentives to encourage strategically important staff to stay ensuring staff turnover is effectively managed. Although a workforce development plan is in place and skills development is undertaken, there is no succession planning targeted at all high-risk areas within the Council. The Council is ensuring that it has the necessary capacity to deliver priorities but remains vulnerable should some key staff leave in areas that are not heavily resourced.

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

- 47** Management capacity has improved and is now a strength. The Council acknowledges that during a period of rapid improvement this capacity has been a limiting factor. For example delays were experienced in developing the asset management plan. This has been addressed through new posts and effective internal appointments. Following the previous CPA a new chief executive was appointed and twelve of the fifteen heads of service are either new or in post through internal recruitment. External expertise is appropriately utilised to address gaps such as the successful interim management of leisure services by consultants. Effective management capacity is making a positive contribution to the delivery of priorities.
- 48** The approach to equalities and diversity is comprehensive. All service areas have developed robust diversity action plans. These were developed through conducting diversity impact assessments and are supported by diversity champions. The plans include race, gender, disability and other equality themes. The Corporate Diversity Strategy, Race Equality Scheme, Disability Equality Scheme and the Council's Service Diversity Action Plans have been consulted internally and externally. To help support implementation all staff have diversity training. The Council secured Level 3 of the Local Government Equality Standard in March 2007 placing it in the top 25 per cent of councils nationally. The external assessment awarded an excellent rating for the wide range of equality action plans across all departments. The Council has a clear customer focus in the delivery of services to all communities.
- 49** Overview and scrutiny is not sufficiently effective and has had only limited impact. Decisions and policies are not being robustly and routinely challenged. To address recognised weaknesses in scrutiny changes have been made. These include the introduction of exception reporting in March 2007 to increase the focus on performance. Training has been delivered to councillors, some externally from Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA). Although overview and scrutiny has focused on specific issues, such as the swimming pool admission policy, the overall impact on services delivered to the community has been limited. Scrutiny has yet to demonstrate impact on improving outcomes for local people.
- 50** The Council's approach to securing value for money is adequate. All services have completed assessments to identify those areas where a more detailed value for money study is required such as with parks and open spaces. Specific VfM indicators are now in place. This work has highlighted that benchmarking of both costs and service quality has still to be refined to give a comprehensive picture. VfM now has high prominence but there is currently little evidence of clear outcomes and tangible improvements.
- 51** The Council is making significant investment in information technology (IT) to improve services to people. A Customer Relationship Management Project (CRM) is planned to be operational in March 2008. A contact centre will resolve a high proportion of enquiries across all services at the first point of contact. Although the Council has been slow at introducing CRM it has now put in place the necessary IT infrastructure. The Council is therefore well placed to improve the level of service to customers through more effective use of IT.

Performance management

- 52** The Council is performing adequately in this area, at only minimum requirements. The Council has made a significant investment in developing a comprehensive performance management system. This has been instrumental in delivering improved services. Clear links between high level strategies through to individual personal development plans are in place. Councillors are actively involved in challenging and managing performance. The Council responds well to external challenge, uses it and learning from others to improve services. New performance management arrangements for some partnerships are in place but have yet to demonstrate outcomes. However, some important weaknesses remain such as inconsistent target setting and action planning. Effective project management is not consistently applied.
- 53** An effective performance management culture is developing. The framework, in place for three years, is comprehensive. Previously managing performance was a considerable corporate weakness. There are now explicit links between the sustainable community plan, the corporate plan, service plans, financial planning and personal targets. Customer and performance champions have been introduced to ensure effective performance management practices are undertaken at a service level and a member champion oversees progress. Improved performance management has contributed to the significant improvement in the quality of services delivered to the community.
- 54** Service and performance management arrangements are overly complex. The Council has recognised that the service plans currently used are too long and not user friendly. However the comprehensive approach has achieved its purpose of helping to develop a culture of performance management. A clearer and more focussed service planning template is to be introduced from Autumn 2007. A review and consolidation of key strategies is underway to ensure they are explicitly focussed on delivering priorities and are supported with clear deliverable actions and plans. For example the communication and consultation strategies have been incorporated into an overarching 'Customer First' strategy. Clarity through effective service plans and a clear corporate focus on strategies is bringing services together and enabling the more effective management of performance.
- 55** Action planning and target setting is not consistently strong across all services. Not all plans are supported by clear and SMART deliverable actions. Some lower level plans contain targets such as 'to reduce' or 'to increase' which do not clearly set out what level of achievement is being strived for. For example the action plan for improving attendance at neighbourhood meetings does not have quantified targets or baseline information. Without clear targets and SMART action plans consistently in place across all services it is not possible to assess the effectiveness of delivery actions.

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- 56** Councillors are actively involved in challenging and managing performance. In response to a peer review, councillor involvement in service planning has been enhanced. Chairs and vice chairs of committees now review and challenge service plans prior to their submission for committee approval. This is considered to be a significant improvement by officers and by councillors who have become more engaged in service planning. Performance information presented to members has improved. A basket of performance indicators (PIs), consisting of both statutory and local indicators, is used to assess service performance. These enable the delivery of priorities to be effectively tracked. Improved monitoring of performance by councillors contributes directly to the corporate aim of improving the council as well as to improving the quality of services.
- 57** Staff are clear of their role in helping deliver corporate priorities. There is an annual personal performance development process (PPDP) that specifies how each individual is expected to contribute to the delivery of priorities. Clear targets are agreed, set and performance assessed against them. The PPDP also assesses staff against a set of corporate competencies, which reflect the skills, and abilities staff need to have or develop to improve services. The Council received *'Investors In People'* re-accreditation in March 2007 which acknowledged progression since the last assessment.
- 58** Project management is inconsistently applied. It is robustly applied in some areas, but not consistently used for all projects. The management of large scale projects such as LSVT and CRM has been effective. Project management for less strategic, but important projects, has been less well managed despite the existence of a project management handbook. A recently developed project management framework, based on PRINCE2, has yet to be applied in practice. The Council runs the risk of some projects not delivering the desired results within the required timescales without consistently effective project management.
- 59** Performance management arrangements for partnerships are in place but have yet to demonstrate their effectiveness. A clear performance management framework has recently been put in place for the LSP, and shared targets are disaggregated amongst partners. There are five action plans assigned to thematic groups which in turn link to local area agreement themes. Performance indicators are in place to track progress towards delivering national and local targets and achieving shared objectives. The Executive Board receives exception monitoring reports of progress against key targets, and year-to-date performance. The recent appointment of a partnership manager is increasing the capacity to improve further the performance management of partnerships. Effective performance management supports the delivery of the shared objectives in the community strategy.

- 60** The Council responds to, and learns from, external challenge and seeks best practice. It has worked well with the Monitoring Board and has delivered the short term improvements set to address the fundamental weakness identified in CPA 2004. The IDeA has been used as a critical friend and the Council has addressed the areas of weakness identified. Best practice is sought and used to improve services. A peer review by another council of the homelessness and housing advice service has resulted in improvements. The Council is learning from best practice and external challenge to improve the quality of services.

What has been achieved?

Achievement and improvement

- 61 The Council is performing well in this area. There has been some significant improvement across a range of services and across all priority areas. Some key front line services that were previously poorly performing are now delivering high quality outcomes for the community at a level comparable with the best 25 per cent of councils in the country. The achievements delivered against the four corporate priorities are set out below.

Improving the Council

- 62 The Council has strengthened its ability to manage and improve services since being categorised as 'poor' in CPA 2004. It has focused on the recovery/improvement plan agreed by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) for a number of key internal and external improvements. These have been monitored by DCLG through the monitoring board. The main areas of focus demanded by the monitoring board such as the benefits service have been comprehensively addressed. Progress is such that the monitoring board is now preparing to return the responsibility to the Council for monitoring its own progress. Supported by a clear focus on delivering ambitions and priorities, together with improved performance management, the Council is now well placed to improve further.
- 63 The significant improvement in performance between 2004/05 and 2006/07 is shown by 63 per cent of the Audit Commission's selected indicators having improved over the period. This compares well to the average for all district councils of 58 per cent of these indicators improving. The proportion of PIs where the Council is in the best performing quartile is 57 per cent, compared to a district average of 31 per cent. High performing indicators cross the range of corporate priorities. This is in stark contrast to 2002/03 when 55 per cent of indicators were in the worst performing 25 per cent of councils. This high level of performance across a range of indicators shows that the Council is successfully putting in place the necessary building blocks to deliver services in line with its priorities.
- 64 Levels of satisfaction are generally high and being maintained in key areas. Satisfaction has improved in some key areas between 2003 and 2007. For example in 2006/07 the reported satisfaction with waste collection and recycling was 86 per cent and 80 per cent respectively. This maintained the Council in the best performing 25 per cent of district councils in England. Overall satisfaction with the Council has improved and marked improvement in satisfaction is seen in some key services such as the processing of benefits claims.

- 65 Solid progress has been made in leisure services which were selected as a key priority area by the monitoring board. In 2003 the leisure service was making uncontrolled financial losses, had a lack of strategic direction and suffered from poor performance management. Difficult decisions were taken including outsourcing some parts of the services, ceasing to provide others and using external interim management for the remaining functions. The service is now financially stable and the quality and range of activities has improved. For example leisure activities for older people and for those with cardiac problems who are referred by local GPs. One of the two main leisure facilities was QUEST¹ accredited in September 2007. Overall use has increased and satisfaction has increased from 52 per cent to 56 per cent between 2003/04 and 2006/07 (although this does still represent below average performance). Comprehensive improvement plans are in place including for shared education and leisure facilities with the County Council. Consultation is underway to develop a long term strategy for delivering leisure facilities in the Borough. The Council has therefore maintained a clear focus on improving key front line leisure services with a view to tackling the health inequalities that exist in the Borough.
- 66 The comprehensive focus on equalities and diversity is improving services to vulnerable groups. All staff receive extensive training in diversity to ensure services do not disadvantage any people. Services are responsive to users' needs. For example as a result of consultation, opening hours have been extended in the benefits service, additional phone lines provided and increased staff made available at peak times. The Council has also provided training for taxi drivers covering a range of disabilities to ensure vehicles and drivers supplied meet customer needs. Vulnerable sections of the community are therefore receiving appropriately targeted services.

Environment - Civic Pride

- 67 Good progress has been made in delivering environment services. The percentage of roads failing to meet the Government standard for cleanliness has fallen from 10 per cent in 2005/06 to 3 per cent between December 2006 and March 2007. This places the Council in the best 25 per cent of councils nationally. Satisfaction has increased from 61 per cent in 2003/04 to 72 per cent in 2006/07 and the number of complaints has fallen. The contract sets out that the performance of the contractor is, in part, assessed against the delivery of top quartile performance over the term of the contract. The Council has set high standards and is delivering improved outcomes for local people against its civic pride priority.

¹ Quality Scheme for Sport and Leisure.

- 68 Value for money is being secured with good quality waste and recycling services. In addition to high levels of satisfaction with the waste and recycling service, costs, at £34.38 per head in 2006/07, were comparatively low. Although steady progress is being achieved in increasing the overall rate of recycling, the Council is clear of the need for improvement. In 2006/07, 26 per cent of household waste was recycled which was below average. Targeted awareness raising and education has been successful in increasing participation in the kerbside collection scheme. The current (unaudited) recycling rate has increased to 30 per cent. The range of recyclables is being expanded to include cans and plastics to deliver a recycling rate of 45 per cent by 2011/12. The Council is therefore securing improved outcomes and is putting in place the building blocks to deliver against this local and key national priority.
- 69 The Council has responded positively to concerns over the condition of parks and open spaces. Almost a fifth of the public open spaces within the Borough are designated for play, with 23 play areas within 18 recreation grounds. Parks and open spaces is the only area to have seen a fall in satisfaction, from 66 per cent in 2003/04 to 60 per cent in 2006/07. This is mainly attributable to some poor quality and ill-equipped play areas. A thorough review has been completed which included the views of children and parents resulting in a comprehensive, long term play strategy being in place. Some key improvements have been delivered including the closure of some play areas with additional resources used to improve others. Significant investment has been agreed, with the Council allocating £100,000 per annum over the next five years. A partnership approach has been taken to secure further funding such as through contributions from partners, residents and developers (£106 funding). A donation of £28,000 from the family and £27,000 from the Cleanaway Pitsea Marshes Trust enabled the Jason Adams Memorial Playground to be opened in July 2006. This demonstrates a comprehensive response to address community expectations.

Regeneration and homes

- 70 The quality of the planning service has seen significant improvement and is supporting the need to encourage quality development in the Borough and provide improved employment prospects. The speed of determining planning applications has improved in all areas and the number of successful appeals against decisions is comparatively low. The determination of minor applications (the bulk of applications made to councils) has moved from being among the worst levels of performance in 2003/04 to among the best in 2005/06. Major applications are also determined faster although overall numbers are low. Comparatively few decisions are lost on appeal. This has partly been achieved through improvements in pre-application advice and guidance, engaging with agents through forums, and improved case management. Improvement to the development control process is supporting the corporate priority of 'regeneration and homes'.

- 71 The clear focus on regeneration activity is already having a positive impact on the local community. From a position where there were no clear plans and little regeneration having taken place, the Council and its partners are delivering some ambitious schemes against a clear regeneration agenda. They have achieved a transformation in the quality of Thorney Bay; a new 36 acre country park (on a former landfill site) has been secured for Canvey Heights and external funding of £1 million is enabling the current regeneration scheme at Canvey Island seafront. The new Paddocks primary care centre is a good example of effective partnership work. Together with the primary care trust, a new health facility is under construction which brings together GPs on Canvey Island and also offers district nursing, a pharmacy and blood/X-ray services. This prevents the need for residents to travel to Southend hospital. Although a long term ambition, the clear focus on regeneration is already having an impact on the local community both to tackle areas of deprivation and health inequalities.
- 72 Significant improvements have been achieved in the Benefits service. From being a poor service in 2003/04 the Council is now high performing - well within the best 25 per cent of councils in England. The average speed of processing new benefit claims has reduced from 68 days in 2003/04 to less than 24 days in 2006/07. Nationally the Council rates 30th out of 353 for satisfaction with the speed of service and 49th for customer satisfaction with the service overall. Accuracy of processing has also shown demonstrable improvement. A high performing benefits service supports potentially vulnerable people.
- 73 The Council has worked well to support those in greatest housing need. A proactive approach has seen all 6,500 recipients of housing and council tax benefit informed about Warm Front grants. Monthly applications have increased as a result from 32 in 2006 to 482 applications in February 2007 alone. To date over 500 properties have had improvement work undertaken. Partnership working has improved provision, for example by working with the police and a neighbouring council, sanctuary accommodation has been secured for women fleeing domestic violence. The Council is therefore working proactively to improve the lives of the most vulnerable members of the community in accordance with this corporate priority.
- 74 The Council is on track to deliver the East of England housing targets although not enough affordable homes have been built. To achieve the 4,000 housing requirement to 2021, the Council requires an average of 200 dwellings per year to be completed. This is being exceeded annually. In 2004/05 there were 255 completions and between 2001 and 2006, 1,804 new homes were built. The needs of elderly people and those with disabilities - one in five households in the Borough have a disabled resident - are being successfully targeted with 207 special needs homes built in the last three years. However during the period 2001-2006 only 29 new affordable homes were provided - three per cent of the total new dwellings. This level of affordable housing supply is well below requirements. The Council is aware of the need to focus on this area. Robust planning policies are now in place to address this. A number of planning decisions have recently been taken which will deliver a significant increase in the supply of affordable homes. Those agreed to date include 18 homes in 2007/08 and a further 76 in 2008/09.

- 75 The Council has managed its own housing stock well and is taking a comprehensive approach to LSVT of its 1500 houses. At 80 per cent, satisfaction with council housing is high and increasing. Recent investment, such as through a major window and door replacement scheme, has seen 80 per cent of Council owned homes meeting the decent homes standard. However an options appraisal, completed in July 2005, identified that it was not a sustainable option to retain the housing stock, both for financial reasons and for delivery of the decent homes standard by 2010. There have been some unforeseen delays in this process such as the need to replace the independent tenant advisor, but the Council is managing risks associated with the project well. Much work has been undertaken to prepare tenants for a ballot. Effective project management has ensured the delivery of a comprehensive communication and consultation process. This included visits to all homes, weekly press briefings, distribution of a DVD and the use of a show home to demonstrate the improvements that would be realised should a ballot decide to transfer the housing stock. The ballot will take place in February 2008. Effective preparatory work places the Council well to achieve a successful long term sustainable future of the housing stock.

Community safety

- 76 The Council and its partners are effectively addressing crime and disorder issues. Despite being a relatively low crime area, public consultation identified disproportionately high levels of fear of crime. As a result crime and disorder became one of the Council's priorities. A corporate restructure recognised the need for effective partnership working and a partnership unit was established in Community Services. A community safety officer and an antisocial behaviour coordinator have also been appointed and the Council part funds four police community support officers (PCSOs). Overall the Council and its partners are on target to achieve the public service agreement (PSA) target of a 15 per cent reduction in crime by 2007/08 from the 2003/04 baseline. By April 2007 a 14 per cent reduction had been achieved. Effective partnerships and investment is tackling crime levels experienced by those living in the Borough.
- 77 A comprehensive approach is taken to tackle crime hotspots. One initiative resulted in six acceptable behaviour contracts being issued to dissuade the recipients from gathering in a specific area. In addition, environmental enhancements aimed at making the area less appealing for congregating youths were delivered. There was a 26 per cent decrease in incidents of anti social behaviour in the six months after this multi agency approach, compared to the preceding six months. In another location up to 100 youths would gather and drunken behaviour contributed to significant local concerns so imposition of a Dispersal Order was agreed by LSP partners. Action was also taken by the licensing committee regarding an off-licence that was selling alcohol to underage youths. Working with young people in the area resulted in the provision of a youth shelter. Complaints have fallen significantly. The Council is delivering against its priority for community safety.

- 78** A balanced approach of enforcement and education is adopted with partners. Illegal motorcycling in some locations had caused problems of noise and antisocial behaviour. An education and awareness campaign included a leaflet jointly produced with the police highlighting the problems and legal responsibilities. The police delivered training sessions in schools and the Council's environmental health service initiated a high profile and well publicised scheme with all petrol stations in the Borough signing up to an agreement not to sell fuel to off-road motorcycles. Targeted police operations have seen some motorcycles seized. The number of calls to a special hotline has fallen considerably as a result of this partnership approach to targeting specific issues.
- 79** Proactive action to target environmental crime both through enforcement and rapid intervention is resulting in improved satisfaction. This is supported by revised corporate policy and departmental enforcement statements. Appropriate use of fixed penalty notices and other enforcement action is taken regarding environmental crime. This includes action to tackle fly posting. Companies receive an initial warning. Enforcement action is taken if this is then ignored. The incidence of fly posting has dropped significantly. In 2003/04, 48 per cent of residents considered abandoned or burnt out cars to be a problem. A survey in 2006/07 showed this had fallen to 6 per cent. There has also been a reduction from 76 per cent to 43 per cent concerning vandalism or graffiti. It is therefore clear that the approach to tackle environmental crime is effective.
- 80** The Council is proving effective in reducing the fear of crime. Communication with the community about crime includes a local charity radio service, part funded by the Council, for sheltered housing residents. Messages include warnings about bogus callers, providing clear messages on crime issues to this potentially vulnerable group. Fear of crime is reducing. Surveys indicate a reduction in the level of perceived crime and antisocial behaviour from 46 per cent in 2003/04 to 21 per cent in 2006/07.

Appendix 1 - Framework for Corporate Assessment

- 1 This corporate assessment was carried out under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999, under which the Audit Commission has power to inspect local authorities' arrangements for securing continuous improvement. The results of the corporate assessment contribute to the determination of the overall CPA category for an authority, which the Audit Commission is required to assess and report on under Section 99 of the Local Government Act 2003.
- 2 The Council's self assessment provided a key resource in focusing the assessment activity which included consideration of:
 - key documentation, including the Council's improvement plan;
 - updated performance indicators and performance data; and
 - interviews and meetings attended.
- 3 The assessment for Castle Point Borough Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 7 September to 12 September 2007.
- 4 This report has been discussed with the Council, which has been given the opportunity to examine the Audit Commission's assessment. This report will be used as the basis for improvement planning by the Council.