



Learning from Comprehensive Performance  
Assessment of district councils

# **Improvement breakthroughs**

**this paper  
highlights eight  
breakthrough  
areas for district  
councils to focus  
on to overcome  
the challenges  
they face in  
securing  
improvement**



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# What's this paper a

# bout?

Between June 2003 and December 2004, the Audit Commission completed Comprehensive Performance Assessments (CPA) of all district councils (DCs) in England. Those assessments have provided a wealth of information about the progress DCs are making to continuously improve their services and deliver better outcomes for local people.<sup>1</sup>

Based on the findings from CPA, this paper highlights eight breakthrough areas for DCs to focus on to overcome the challenges they face in securing improvement. It has been developed for key decision makers and staff involved in the improvement of council services, and aims to support the good work that DCs are already undertaking to achieve improvements in their localities.

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<sup>1</sup> The results of individual DC assessments have already been shared with councils and published on the Audit Commission website [www.audit-commission.gov.uk/cpa](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/cpa). We have also published an overview report of the findings from CPA for DCs, *Comprehensive Performance Assessment: Scores and Analysis of Performance for District Councils in England, 2003/04*.

# A journey of continu

CPA has shown that many councils are successfully addressing the current needs of their local communities and developing the capacity to drive improvements for the future. What's more, good performance is found across the whole spectrum of DCs, regardless of political make-up, wealth, size, geography or the populations they serve.

While there are aspects of every council that are working well, there are also areas that are still a problem and require further attention to improve. This is true for excellent DCs as well as weaker authorities – the balance is just different. This is reflected in the way that very different councils have achieved the same overall categorisation. For example, some Good DCs have clear medium- to long-term ambitions and priorities but need to tighten up on management. Whereas other Good councils are well managed with attention to costs but don't have the clear long-term ambitions and plans that they need. Similarly, some Fair councils are getting better at leading and managing, with the right culture and community engagement evolving, but are still weak on achieving good quality services. Still others are achieving well in long-standing priority areas, but don't have the corporate capacity to improve or extend this success to other service areas. There are, however, some common areas for action among DCs in each CPA category.

The breakthroughs identified in this paper can be thought of as stages of improvement for councils, with some more important to get right early on and others more likely to be achieved when continuous improvement has already begun to take root. We set out opposite our guide to how the breakthroughs relate, in general, to councils at different stages of the improvement journey.

# ous improvement

Stages of improvement	Key improvement breakthroughs
<p><b>Moving on from Poor and Weak</b> Councils need to concentrate on arresting decline and securing the foundations to build from – leadership, positive relationships, financial, performance and people management, community engagement and making the most of partnership opportunities.</p>	<p>1 <b>Lead and manage effectively</b> 2 <b>Pull together</b> 3 <b>Make time to listen and learn</b></p>
<p><b>Moving on from Fair</b> Councils need to resolve any leadership and relationship issues including tackling any remaining complacency and insularity, clarifying medium- and long-term direction, priorities and targets, strengthening systems and making partnerships more productive.</p>	<p>4 <b>Look outwards</b> 5 <b>Take a long-term view</b> 6 <b>Embed performance management and other systems</b></p>
<p><b>Moving on from Good</b> Councils need to make sure that direction and priorities are crystal clear, ensure all communities are engaged, embed systems and satisfy themselves that partnerships are giving the full benefit.</p>	<p>7 <b>Stick with change and improvement</b></p>
<p><b>For Excellent councils</b> Councils are performing strongly in most areas but can still do more work on embedding their performance management, making clear the long-term vision and what are not priorities, refining and bolstering scrutiny and risk management and building learning into the way things are done.</p>	<p>8 <b>Prepare for the future and reach for new heights</b></p>

The remainder of this paper sets out what each breakthrough is about and why it matters so much. It also highlights what some councils have done to make these breakthroughs.

The pull-out section *Thinking About Improvement Breakthroughs* suggests ways to take forward in your own organisation the ideas on improvement presented in this paper.

# Lead and manag

*‘Leadership coupled with strong communications has been key for us. We didn’t just decide ‘this is where we’re heading’, we took time to find out what local communities think is important and what isn’t.’*

(Councillor Roy Slack, Leader, Exeter City Council)

Good leadership is crucial for improvement. But why? What is it about leadership that makes it so vital? It’s about getting frameworks, organisational style and relationships at the top of the organisation right. The most important aspects of good leadership include agreeing a crystal clear vision, priorities and targets. Leaders need to explain to the public, to partners and to council staff what the council is doing and why. They need to be completely open and explain that decisions about priorities may mean putting less investment into some areas.

Without good political leadership, setting a direction and agreeing a strategy for what the council is trying to achieve can be an ongoing battle, with no one willing to provide the clarity necessary to enable the organisation to be sure it is doing the right thing. Reflecting your local community needs and wants is also vital – but without community leadership it’s difficult to sustain this. Without effective day-to-day management improvement can seem like a far-off possibility. The vision and priorities need to be translated into delivery and result in better services for local people.

# e effectively

## Who is doing well in this area?

### South Hams – Crystal clear priorities

Effective leadership has been crucial to setting clear priorities for our council area – based on community and partnership discussions and working. Collectively, we decided, ‘if a job’s worth doing, it’s worth doing well’. With the help of our Chief Executive and Leader we’ve really shifted from being a provider focused on preserving the environment to a community leader with a clear picture of what matters most – affordable housing and local prosperity.

We have six ranked priorities, as well as ambitious targets. These all flow from conversations with local people and partners, including parishes, the four market towns, (Totnes, Ivybridge, Kingsbridge and Dartmouth), and hinterlands, and a quarterly citizen’s panel. Our priorities and targets actually mean something tangible and real to local people. Our top targets are that 66 per cent of all new homes should be affordable and that 100 new socially rented homes are built each year. We are well on the way to achieving these goals. Working with registered social landlords, we facilitated 386 affordable homes

in the last four years and are in the top-performing 25 per cent of councils in England in this area.

Not surprisingly our resident satisfaction in 2000/01 was rated the highest in Devon and Cornwall and in the top 25 per cent of councils in England at 76 per cent. The figure for 2003/04, (which is calculated differently), is 64 per cent, which is still the highest among Devon districts.

### Things to think about in your authority

1. How clear are the council’s vision, priorities and targets – will you know when they’ve been achieved?
2. Are leaders clearly behind the vision, priorities and targets?
3. Do leaders act for the community as well as the council?
4. Is service delivery being effectively managed in line with the agreed vision and priorities?

## Breakthrough 2

# Pull together

*'We may be a hung council but our political groups all recognise the main issues and priorities facing our community. Despite political differences there is unity of purpose and masses of energy and enthusiasm for improving quality of life.'*

(Councillor Keith Musgrave, Leader, Vale Royal Borough Council)

What happens when everyone pulls together? It's about culture and motivation. Everyone should be aware of and use the frameworks the council has for making things better. Everyone needs to think through the implications for other services and partners of what is being done. Pulling together also relies on clear, shared objectives that flow from effective leadership.

Getting relationships right is a big part of pulling together. Improvements are made by people working together and if energy is consumed by the tensions of difficult relationships it's harder to find the will to be creative and focused on the job that needs to be done. There are many different relationship 'fronts' – political relationships, relationships between officers and members, the relationship with the public and partners and relationships across, as well as within services. It can seem difficult to keep them all going productively.

Councils with supportive and trusting relationships seem to work at it – it takes will and time. They help all councillors feel engaged, for example, by finding roles for everyone and offering support. People are encouraged to recognise the benefits of genuine constructive challenge and avoid the paralysis and loss of trust – including that of the public – that can arise from entrenched position-taking. Officers are encouraged to work across services, with individual managers and directors leading on cross-service issues.

## Who is getting on in this area?

### Hambleton – Everyone on the same side

Our vision reflects the way we try to pull together and get everyone on the same side: *‘A Hambleton of sustainable, safe, healthy and prosperous communities where people feel part of their community and work together to improve quality of life for all and participate in decisions that affect them, which is welcoming, values diversity and supports the disadvantaged.’*

We always work in partnership with stakeholders and our local communities to establish and then achieve our ambitions. For example, the publication of the community plan followed a period of sustained joint working including targeting specific hard-to-reach groups, using the Council’s website, providing open access to copies in libraries and issuing press releases.

We’ve also established a framework for involving local communities in the local strategic partnership by setting up Community Investment Prospectus teams. These are based on each of the five market towns and their hinterlands and have enhanced local

community and voluntary organisations’ involvement in the work of the partnership.

Our officers and councillors work together constructively based on mutual respect and understanding of roles. Councillors regard the response and support they get from officers as first class, almost without exception, and key partners echo this. Leading councillors on scrutiny are also positive about their role and feel their contribution is increasingly valued.

Pulling together has helped us achieve real results. Overall we have over one-third of our key performance indicators in the top quartile, a good external inspection record, beacon status for our work on tackling crime in rural areas as well as a wide range of external accreditations.

### Things to think about in your authority

1. Is the vision for what will be achieved shared and owned across the council and with partners?
2. Is everyone pulling together to achieve your priorities? (senior managers, middle managers, frontline staff, senior members, backbenchers, key partners)
3. What is the common ground between member groups? Can this be used to help build consensus and cooperation?

## Breakthrough 3

# Make time to list

*‘Learning from what works well and more importantly what doesn’t has been absolutely key to our success. We place a high value on learning and on having a blame-free culture – both are crucial for innovation and improvement.’*

(David Cook, Chief Executive, Kettering Borough Council)

Sometimes it can seem easier to just get on with doing what you think is the right thing rather than finding the time and making the effort to listen and learn. Just go ahead on your own and sometimes you’ll get it right. But without the benefit of good intelligence it’s tricky to make good decisions about what the council should be doing and how resources should be used. Listening and learning from others means you can find out about the pitfalls rather than going through them all yourselves.

Listening and learning is only the start of course. Deciding how to put learning into action is also vital and you should let people know how you’ve acted on what they said.

Councils that are getting ahead in this area stand out because they value listening and learning. They are prepared to put time aside for it – whether it’s making the effort to hear from harder-to-reach communities or customers, or sharing information across services and listening to frontline staff. Leaders set an example by being prepared to spend time on learning. They know that they don’t always know best.

# en and learn

## Who has been making progress in this area?

### Blyth Valley – Listening and learning

Blyth Valley is the 88th most deprived district. Nonetheless, we have an ambitious vision for the area, which has been developed by our local strategic partnership. Behind this vision is the work we've done to develop communities and understand their needs. For example, we held a public focus group to find out how residents would prioritise council resources. This is part of our comprehensive framework to consult the public and other stakeholders. At the service level we also carry out needs assessments, making extensive use of socio-economic data and trends information.

We also think learning within the organisation is crucial to solving problems. Everyone here – members and officers – owns 'problems' and there isn't a blame culture.

We try to respond positively to external challenge – and act on what we're told.

We actively encourage staff to contribute their ideas about how we can improve services and they can often get on and implement these. Staff are canvassed for their suggestions at regular team meetings. Their ideas are then fed in via 'vision management groups', resulting in service improvements. A good example involves our grounds maintenance staff, who looked at alternatives to litter picking and sweeping. They trialled and implemented vacuums and managed to get funding for a new mini scarab. We also respond to customer feedback, for example, we have changed the way that bushes are cut back to help reduce the fear of crime. And we exchange learning with others in the northeast and nationally.

### Things to think about in your authority

1. Is listening and learning seen as valuable enough to spend time on?
2. Is learning consistently put into practice?

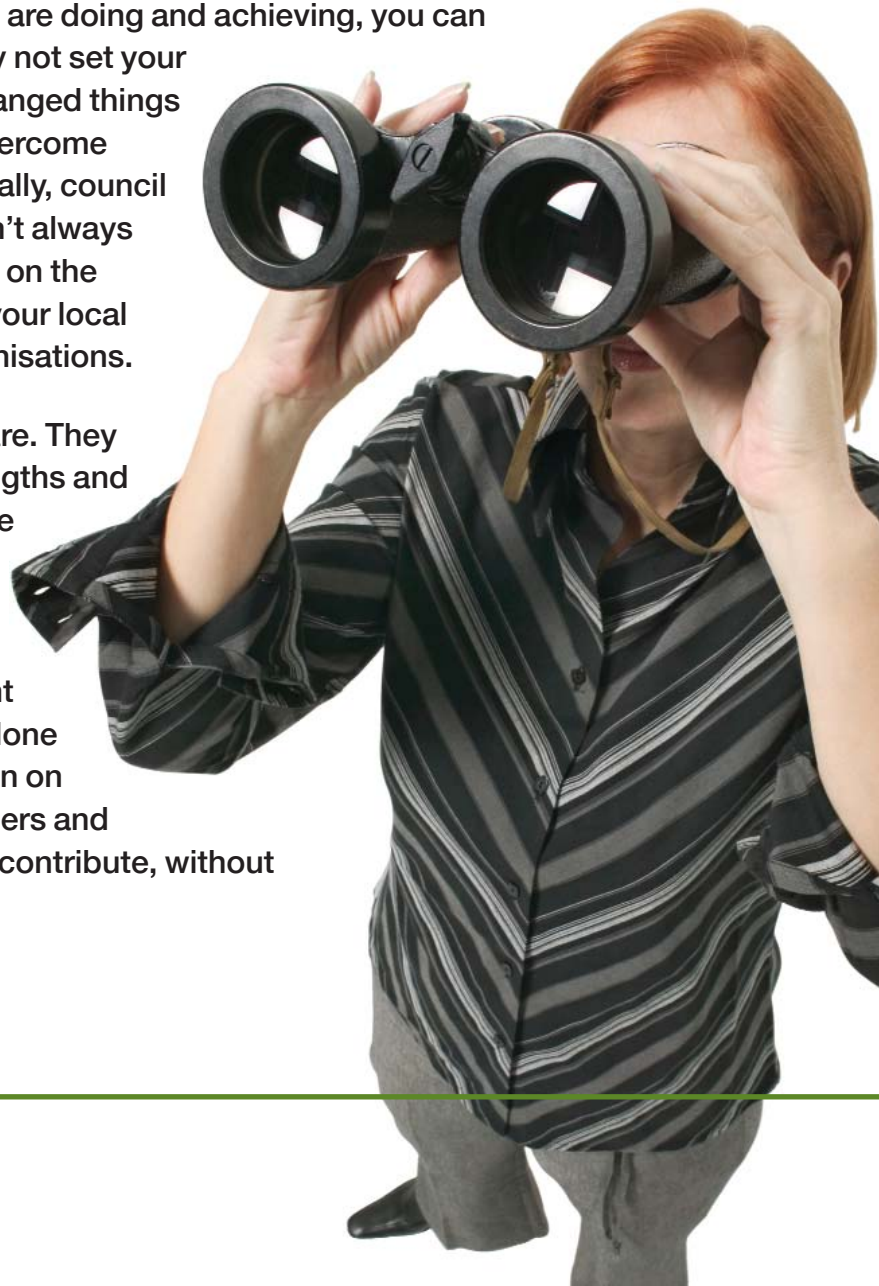
## Breakthrough 4

# Look outwards

In a process of change, some introspection is needed, but this needs to be balanced with looking outwards. This balance is about encouraging self-awareness and challenge rather than insularity, and it's also about taking a wider perspective. You need to think across organisational and geographic boundaries.

If you don't look outwards at what others are doing and achieving, you can underestimate what you can do, and may not set your sights high enough. Others may have changed things that you see as constraints in order to overcome weaknesses and poor performance. Equally, council boundaries, functions and resources don't always relate directly to communities and needs on the ground. You can often achieve more for your local communities by working with other organisations.

Councils that look outwards are self-aware. They understand and take on board their strengths and weaknesses. They see themselves as one piece of the jigsaw of local public services and work out what they can contribute to the community, and to the county and region, balancing the different needs. They focus on what needs to be done and how to overcome barriers, rather than on who actually does it. They evaluate partners and service providers and ask what they can contribute, without prejudging who the provider should be.



*‘We already had an excellent track record of joint working, which proved to be a strong foundation on which to build a joint LSP. Existing relationships and mutual trust meant we were already one step ahead.’*

(Councillor David Lomax, Leader, High Peak Borough Council)

## Who is leading the way in this area?

### Burnley – Achieving so much more through partnership

We considered our role in the community very carefully, following the disturbances in 2001. We worked out when it is most appropriate for us to lead and when others are better placed to do so. We now work very closely with the local strategic partnership and there is strong commitment to the vision and ambitions for Burnley from most councillors and partners.

We know that current and future capacity depend heavily on using and increasing partnership working and accessing external funding. We’ve put huge effort into stabilising and regenerating disadvantaged areas, promoting community cohesion, clearing and improving housing, and improving community safety. This has included close and productive working with partners such as the police and primary care trust.

Partnership working is particularly crucial to improving community cohesion in the Borough. We have a clear framework to deliver neighbourhood renewal, with the right partners and

structures in place. We’ve also been an active and supportive partner in Sure Start and other related health schemes, and are working with the County Council on its review of secondary education.

Working in partnership we’ve successfully obtained external funding for neighbourhood and housing renewal, crime and disorder reduction and community cohesion. One example of this is our crime and disorder reduction partnership, which secured £1 million from the Single Regeneration Budget to run a street-based drugs project. The County’s drugs and alcohol team manage the project.

We also actively evaluate the effectiveness of partnerships and are working with the local strategic partnership to map and rationalise all the partnerships in the Borough.

### Things to think about in your authority

1. What’s the balance between internal and external focus?
2. How effectively are partnership opportunities used to help achieve outcomes?
3. Do partnerships offer value for money?

# Take a long

*‘Establishing a vision for 2010 has been critical to strengthening our corporate planning framework. It has allowed local communities to shape what we plan to do now and in the future.’*

(Councillor Michael Malone, Deputy Leader, Derwentside District Council)

Agreeing a long-term vision – with priorities that are clear enough to be used as part of future planning – can be much harder than agreeing short-term plans. It can be a daunting task to thrash out the conflicts and really think through what needs to be achieved for local communities in the future.

But getting this right matters. Thinking only short term puts serious limitations on what you can achieve. Achieving broader, more ambitious or more complex outcomes tends to involve a longer planning period, lead-in and delivery time to get the right resources in place and make them work. Councils that think ahead are likely to be in a much stronger position to actually deliver.

Councils that are successful in this area have leaders and managers who understand and sell the benefits of a clear long-term vision – as well as the pitfalls of not having one. This gets people on side. They invest time in working with partners, the community and the LSP in particular, to develop a clear long-term (ten-year plus) vision. These councils work out what their contribution to the community strategy should be and align resources accordingly.

# -term view

## Who is taking a long-term view?

Tonbridge and Malling – A clear ten-year vision for the community

Along with stakeholders and neighbouring councils, we've developed clear ambitions and a long-term vision. Our ambitions are laid down in our community strategy, *Serving You Better*, which was adopted in March 2003. This ten-year vision contains six themes. These cover the key aims for our area, for example, to be a safer place with lower levels of crime.

We've played a leading role in adopting the community strategy through the local strategic partnership. Rather unusually this is on a sub-regional rather than district basis. The West Kent Partnership covers the three councils of Tunbridge Wells, Sevenoaks and Tonbridge and Malling. Its wide-ranging membership includes representatives from all tiers of local government, as well as health, housing, learning, law enforcement, voluntary and business sectors.

Our vision is translated into actions defined for 2003-06. Each action has a lead agency assigned to it and clear links are shown to current plans or strategies that support them.

The Council is named as the lead agency for many of these actions. Progress towards reaching the vision is monitored by checking that these actions are being achieved and by checking our local reality against a set of quality of life indicators and targets.

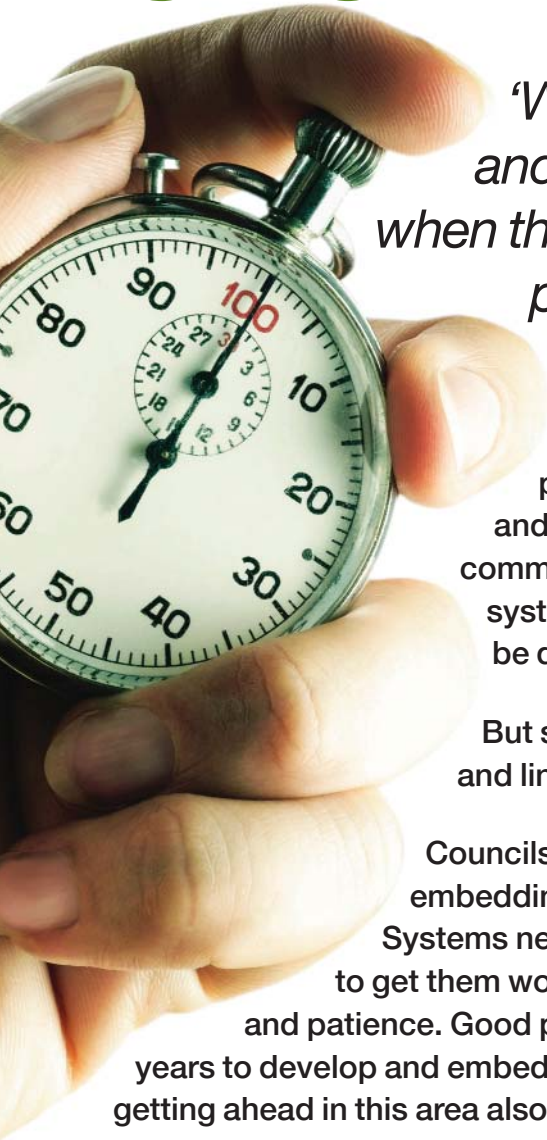
Our vision is also set within the sub-regional context. Links to the County Council's community strategy – the *Vision for Kent* – are clear. The nine themes adopted by Kent take a broad strategic view of community needs across the whole County, while the six themes in our strategy translate these into aims that are of specific relevance to our Borough. We work hard to make responsibilities clear.

### Things to think about in your authority

1. How long term is the council's vision?
2. Is this vision translated into clear actions, for which people are held to account?

## Breakthrough 6

# Embed performance & other systems



*‘We need to know how we are performing, and we need to know how to put things right when they go wrong. This means we have to make performance management work.’*

(John Marsland, Chief Executive, Chichester District Council)

Most councils have systems in place to help manage performance and risks and to plan finances, value for money and human resources. These systems all help to turn council and community visions and ambitions into delivery on the ground. If systems don't work then this obviously puts limitations on what can be delivered and improved.

But systems have to be used by people. You need to embed them and link them up so they work together rather than in parallel.

Councils with strong systems invest in putting them in place and embedding them, with leaders lending their support to this approach. Systems need to be developed, put in place, and then continually refined to get them working in a way fit for the council. Getting this right can take time and patience. Good performance management, for example, can take four to five years to develop and embed – but you can achieve significant gains along the way. Councils getting ahead in this area also recognise that people are likely to need training and development to make systems work well.

# nce management

## Who is embedding performance management and other systems?

### Derbyshire Dales – Excellent performance management

We face some big challenges in Derbyshire Dales, for example, supporting communities in a sparsely populated area and balancing economic health with protection and improvement of the natural environment. Performance management is critical to managing these.

To help, we've developed four clear long-term aims, with seven priority areas for 2003 to 2007 – that are themselves prioritised. Our employees, councillors, and partners understand these and there's a strong commitment at all levels to achieving better outcomes for the district. A consensual approach to building priorities has helped. Specific targets underpin each priority and these guide council decisions, drive service plans, and help us keep focused on the longer term.

Committee agendas cover corporate priorities and there is a systematic approach to performance reporting using information, commentary and analysis. Each committee report makes a clear link to the council's

priorities. The best value performance plan has action plans linked to service areas and these include outcomes and performance measures. This means we can monitor progress on the delivery of service improvements, which the public will see. We use a traffic light system to categorise performance of the key indicators and determine where we need corrective action plans for under-performing services.

Staff action plans and appraisals are linked by a 'golden thread' to the priority areas so people understand how they contribute. We've also set out an annual cycle of service and financial planning linked to performance management.

Performance management is now embedded in our culture, we can demonstrate our achievements in priority areas and we take decisions to do things better.

### Things to think about in your authority

1. Are systems that drive improvement part of 'the day job'?
2. Is there a 'golden thread' from the vision through to individual and team plans so that everyone knows how they contribute?
3. Do separate systems work effectively together?
4. Are systems continually refined and improved?

## Breakthrough 7

# Stick with change improvement

*‘For many years the council has rigorously scrutinised costs and delivery options for services, which has enabled us to go on investing, both in the development of existing services and attractive new initiatives.’*

(Councillor Roger Habgood, Leader, Runnymede Borough Council)

How do you hold your nerve when change goes through a sticky patch? It can be difficult when there are bottlenecks or periods where little change seems to be happening. People can start to lose faith or to snipe and criticise. An ability to ‘stick with it’ at this point is crucial. Improvement and change often take time and a period of determination before plans come to fruition.

Councils that stick with change even when it gets tough tend to have set out clear milestones – as well as targets. They monitor these, understand what’s not working, solve problems when things aren’t on track and make changes as necessary. They use agendas and meetings to keep focused on what is important. They also let people know that change will take time. Councils that have been successful in this area also achieve a balance between sticking with those things that need continuity and recognising that they must be flexible and make adjustments if necessary. They reflect on whether they’re sticking with the right things.

# e and

## Who is sticking with it?

### Warwick – Tenacity

Clear objectives and sustained political backing are prerequisites for success. In a council with no overall control, our members have had to work very hard at providing these and avoiding the pitfalls of being knocked off course by short-term problems. The high levels of confidence that members have in officers and our good working relationships have also been crucial.

Since 1995 we've planned our work using a four-year cycle. This links with the electoral cycle and means that corporate plans are written with a four-year intention, which we then review annually. We've worked on our planning processes over this period and the practice of thinking over a longer timescale is now established in people's minds. We've undertaken some large and very complex projects and stuck with them until we achieve a successful conclusion. Examples of this include the renovations of the Pump Rooms, Kenilworth Abbey End, Warwick Market Place and Leamington old town.

Officer and councillor meetings are carried out according to a structure that helps to maintain a focus on what we want to achieve.

Departments and teams have a regular cycle of meetings that enables them to feed their concerns to the corporate management team at its monthly meetings. Portfolio holders each have a clear role description that focuses on their responsibility for ensuring that priority council aims and targets are achieved. We also try to structure executive agendas and there is a strong emphasis on performance information reporting throughout the council.

We've established a change board of experienced back-bench councillors that acts as a sounding board and challenge for improvement activities and reviews. This provides another opportunity to put the improvement agenda under the spotlight.

### Things to think about in your authority

1. When complex projects are undertaken is there a real determination to stay the course and work at overcoming obstacles?

## Breakthrough 8

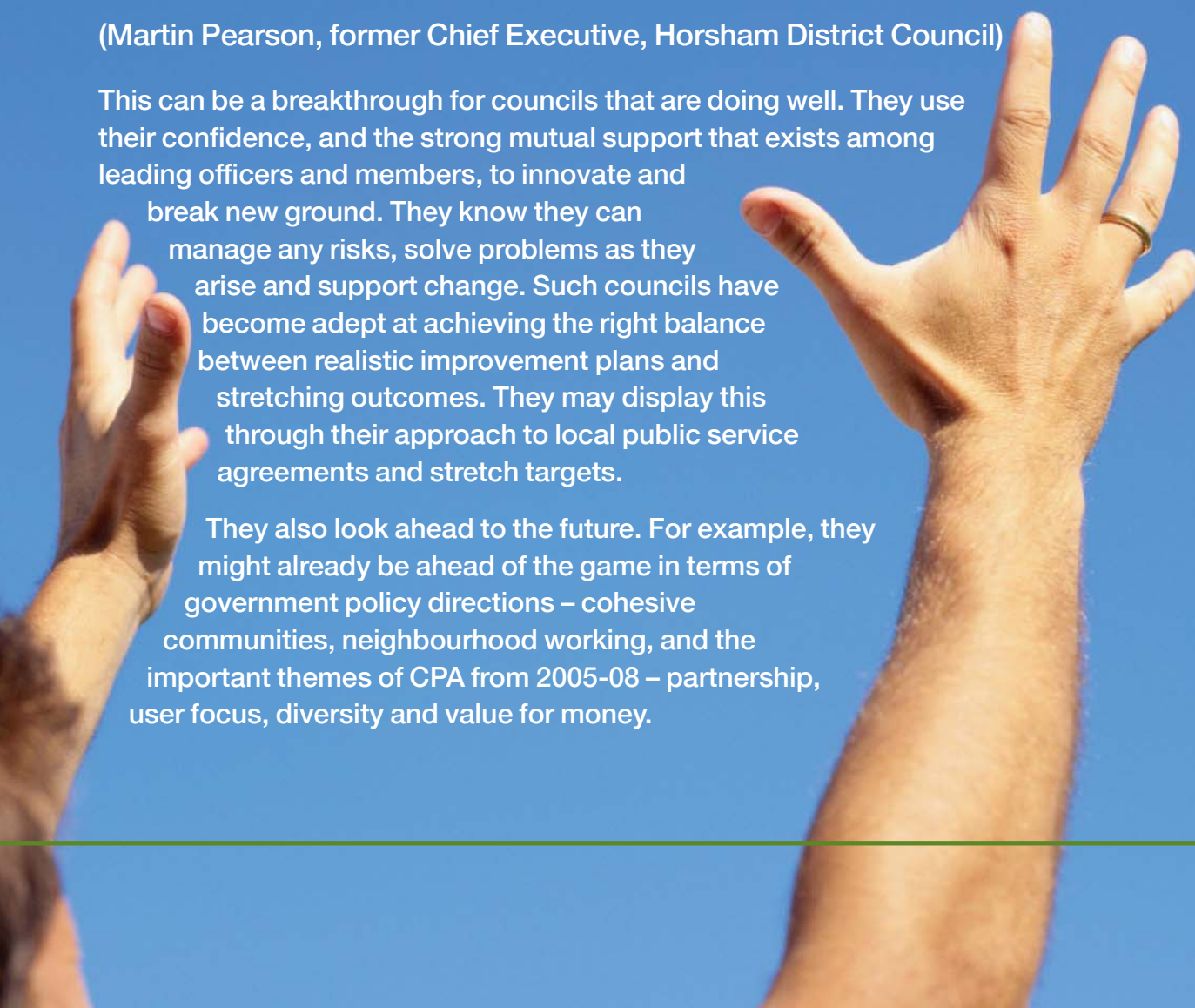
# Prepare for the f new heights

*'No organisation can be complacent about its learning culture. We're keen to produce an improved improvement plan as an objective way of moving beyond excellence.'*

(Martin Pearson, former Chief Executive, Horsham District Council)

This can be a breakthrough for councils that are doing well. They use their confidence, and the strong mutual support that exists among leading officers and members, to innovate and break new ground. They know they can manage any risks, solve problems as they arise and support change. Such councils have become adept at achieving the right balance between realistic improvement plans and stretching outcomes. They may display this through their approach to local public service agreements and stretch targets.

They also look ahead to the future. For example, they might already be ahead of the game in terms of government policy directions – cohesive communities, neighbourhood working, and the important themes of CPA from 2005-08 – partnership, user focus, diversity and value for money.



# uture and reach

## Who is developing in this area?

West Lancashire – Delighting our customers through organisational re-engineering

We're committed to improving access to services. We also want to achieve higher quality and lower costs – and we're prepared to pioneer new ways of working to achieve this.

In 2002 we commissioned a mystery shopping exercise to tell us how well we were meeting customer needs when they contacted us. We found that we dealt quickly with telephone callers but both telephone callers and face-to-face customers were not receiving the necessary quality of service.

So we decided to take action – separating call handling from face-to-face enquiries and setting up a Contact Centre staffed by trained customer services advisors. Our advisors 'own' all calls and deal with them fully wherever possible.

Our customer reception point was remodelled to provide improved face-to-face access to council services. It is now staffed by customer services advisors, who use a council-wide

customer relations information system. The customer contact centre went live in a record 8.5 weeks, and our call handling and customer satisfaction rates improved immediately. The centre was able to handle all calls and provide immediate solutions for 17 services.

Since then, we've invested in innovative business process re-engineering with private sector partners. We started with council tax, to further improve efficiency, and bring as many aspects of it as possible into our Contact Centre. Today more than 50 services are provided fully with just one call to the Contact Centre. The council tax pilot has released £144,000 of cost and efficiency savings, which we have re-invested to further improve council services. Our efforts have put us at the leading edge of Gershon implementation.

### Things to think about in your authority

1. Are you ready to engage with future policy directions – for example, devolving power to neighbourhoods, local leadership?
2. Are you capitalising on your strengths to be more than the sum of your parts?
3. How focused are you on your users and citizens?

CPA shows us that councils making most headway on improvement are those that have:

- a clear sense of purpose about what needs to be achieved for local people;
- the necessary resources (both human and financial); and
- effective systems to channel these resources to where they are needed most.

The eight breakthroughs set out in this paper are key areas for councils to invest time and energy in as they work to improve. The questions posed in the pull-out section *Thinking About Improvement Breakthroughs* are intended as a progress check for councils as they develop in these areas.

We recognise that while many councils still need to develop in the breakthrough areas, many others already have stories to tell about their success. We hope this paper will help councils develop and share good practice by providing a platform for discussion and action.

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