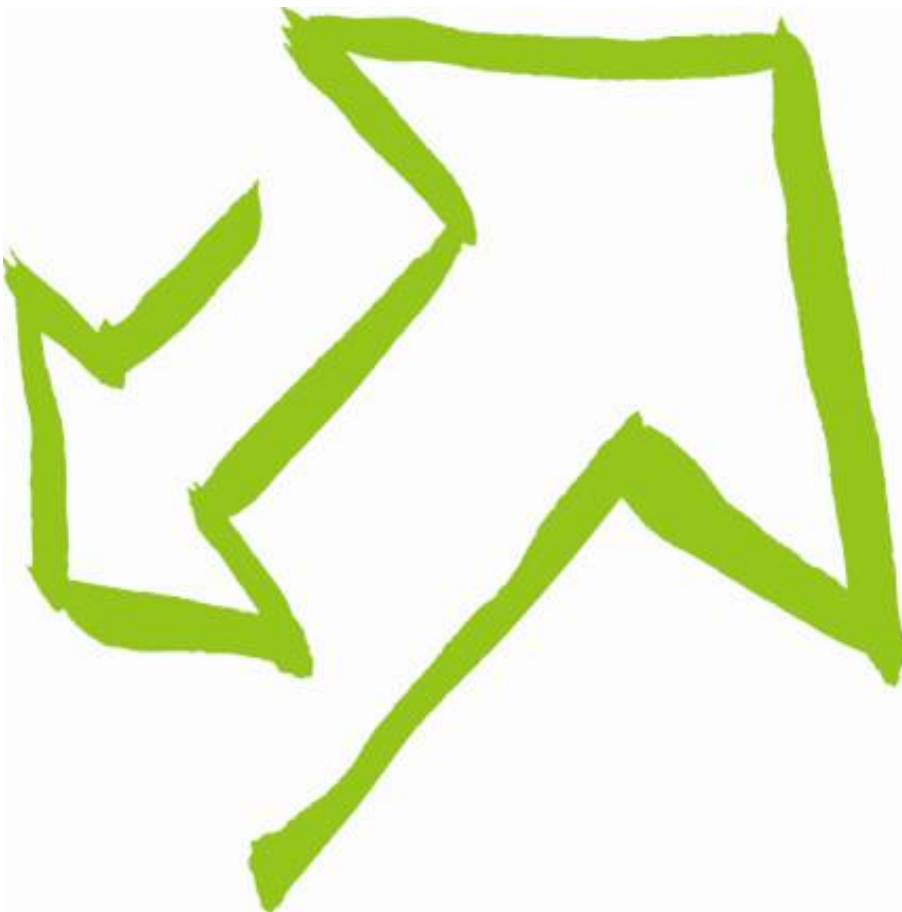


Corporate Assessment

Forest Heath District Council
March 2009



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Status of our reports

The Statement of Responsibilities of Auditors and Audited Bodies issued by the Audit Commission explains the respective responsibilities of auditors and of the audited body. Reports prepared by appointed auditors are addressed to non-executive directors/members or officers. They are prepared for the sole use of the audited body. Auditors accept no responsibility to:

- any director/member or officer in their individual capacity; or
 - any third party.
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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 Forest Heath District Council has improved since the last CPA in 2004 and is performing well in most areas and is rated as 'good'.
- 4 The Council, together with its partners, has adopted a clear, shared vision which is based on a good understanding of the local context and of residents' needs. The Council's vision is aligned to the vision and priorities of the community strategy and to the Local Area Agreement (LAA) themes and links to national and regional priorities. There are clear long, medium and short term targets which are supported by strategies and action plans to ensure that focus is maintained. The Council has recently approved a new strategic corporate plan and has set new targets to deliver its priorities. The new plan provides a clearer link to LAA themes. The Council is seen as a key partner in the achievement of the shared and agreed vision for West Suffolk.
- 5 The Council revised its priorities in January 2008 to better align them to the community strategy and reflect priorities identified through consultation with users, stakeholders and partners. Priorities are clearly aligned to national, regional, sub-regional priorities. Local objectives take these into account while reflecting local need. It has maintained its focus on what matters and as a result the new Newmarket Leisure Centre will open in January 2009. It uses its partnerships effectively to deliver outcomes and efficiencies in priority areas. The Council is working well with most communities and groups to set priorities and investment levels. However, it recognises that further work is required to use the available data to identify outcomes for some groups at risk of disadvantage.
- 6 Capacity is adequate. Good managerial leadership is in place with a focus on delivering priorities and service improvement, whilst increasing efficiency. The capacity of councillors has notably increased since the last CPA. There is a comprehensive induction programme and the Council has been awarded a Member Training Charter this year. The level of challenge by scrutiny is not fully developed but the creation of the Performance and Audit Committee, with its wider remit, is improving challenge. The Council is still developing risk management to ensure officers and councillors see risk as day to day management. Effective investment and use of ICT is delivering improved access to services. Development of the Council's website has increased access in particular the My Neighbourhood search engine. Effective partnership working is providing increased capacity and joint procurement is delivering efficiencies. However, the Council has yet to develop a corporate approach to improving capacity in the voluntary and community sectors.
- 7 Performance management is robust and has significantly improved since the 2004 CPA. Comprehensive frameworks are in place to ensure that officers and councillors challenge and monitor financial and service performance. The Council actively learns from others through external evaluation, data sharing and benchmarking with partners. Council managers welcome new ideas and staff feel empowered and engaged in improvement. As a result they have improved service efficiencies in a number of areas. However learning from informal complaints and compliments is not systematic across the organisation.

Executive summary

- 8 Financial capacity is sufficient to sustain performance. A clear focus on delivering value for money is in place and the Council has met targets for achieving savings. It has successfully attracted external funding to support its priorities particularly for young people and vulnerable groups. This enables it to provide tailored activities to improve outcomes and impact locally.
- 9 The Council is achieving recognisable outcomes against its corporate priorities. Using its good approach to partnership, the Council has been able to secure major investment which is leading to regeneration and growth across the district and particularly within town centres. Through a range of initiatives it has effectively targeted vulnerable groups such as those with a disability, young people and those with alcohol or drug dependencies, to improve their wellbeing and safety. The Suffolk Waste Partnership is leading to improvements in recycling through education. Joint working with St Edmundsbury on litter clearing on the A14/A11 is delivering improvements. It has been successful in delivering affordable and accessible homes priority, working with a range of partners.

Areas for improvement

- 10** The Council should develop processes for identifying the needs of different groups within the community. It needs to do this so that priorities and action plans systematically meet the needs of black and minority ethnic (BME) groups and other groups at risk of disadvantage. It should ensure that this approach is applied across the Council and work with partners to develop a consistent approach. This includes developing differentiated data to better understand the needs of these groups and use this to inform priorities and identify agreed outcomes for specific groups.
- 11** The Council should develop a systematic approach to consultation and communication. This should include: reviewing and acting on informal feedback from users in a structured way; creating a feedback loop so those groups involved in consultation are clear how their views have shaped outcomes; and analysing feedback from diverse customer groups to ensure that priorities and services meet all their needs.
- 12** To ensure that capacity within the community develops, the Council with its partners should establish a corporate approach to enabling and strengthening voluntary and community involvement. This should include engaging with the groups, assessing which require support; adopting a voluntary sector compact and developing a commissioning approach with the voluntary sector.

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	3	6
What has been achieved?	Achievement and Improvement	3	21
weighted score			43
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

- 13** Forest Heath is in North West Suffolk in eastern England, bordering the counties of Norfolk and Cambridgeshire. The district covers nearly 38,000 hectares and is situated on two major transport routes, the A11 and the A14. It has three main towns, Brandon, Mildenhall and Newmarket, with the rest of the population spread across the wider rural area, which has 22 small rural villages. Almost half of the district is designated as a special landscape area and it contains 24 sites of special scientific interest. The London overspill relocation programme brought a significant influx of people to Mildenhall and Brandon. The two largest US Air Force Europe (USAFE) bases in the UK are located in the district at RAF Mildenhall and RAF Lakenheath. The US community associated with these is over 9,000.
- 14** The population is overall younger than average with 20 per cent of the 63,200 inhabitants being under 15 years of age. This is one per cent above the regional and national averages and 16.7 per cent are of pensionable age - three per cent lower than the regional and national averages. There is a high proportion, 16.3 per cent, of people who are not white British; compared to a regional average of 2.7 per cent and national average of 2.3 per cent. Six per cent of the population are from black and minority ethnic communities. The Council feels that these figures underestimate the size of the migrant communities in the district which include people from Eastern European, Portugal and the Indian sub-continent.
- 15** Apart from their role as air force bases, Mildenhall and Lakenheath are important generators of business for a wide range of local companies. High technology industries have emerged, alongside light engineering and service industries. Center Parcs Holiday Village at Elveden Forest, and the horseracing and bloodstock industries in Newmarket are major tourist attractions within the district; the former employing 1,500 staff. Many jobs are low waged with average gross weekly pay in 2007 of £374 compared to the regional figure of £479. In June 2008 those claiming Jobseeker's Allowance was low at one per cent, compared to a regional average of 1.7 per cent and national average of 2.2 per cent. Overall the district is comparatively wealthy, ranking as the 265th most deprived out of 354 English councils. However there are pockets of deprivation.
- 16** The US Air Force creates a high demand for rental property to meet the needs of their personnel and families. This has an impact on private sector rents which are up to 50 per cent higher than in surrounding districts. Service personnel and their families spend little outside the bases which have their own infrastructure of shops, supermarkets and entertainment venues. Pressure for new housing has led to the approval for 1,595 houses to be built at Red Lodge.

The Council

- 17** The Council has a history of Conservative control. Currently the Conservatives have a majority with 20 of the 27 seats. The remaining seats are held by four Liberal Democrats, one Independent and two members of Forest Heath Independent Alliance. Eleven of those elected in May 2007 are new to the Council.
- 18** The Council has eight committees: community services, corporate services, planning, licensing, standards, appeals, and overview and scrutiny. There is also a performance and audit committee. In addition, there are 15 working groups focussing on key corporate areas and projects such as: capital programme; e-government; public relations; and the home of horse racing. The Council also has created twelve member champion roles that have a specialist focus such as environment or procurement.
- 19** The Chief Executive is supported by two strategic directors. One is responsible for services and one for resources. There are six heads of service. This team of nine forms the Council's management team. The organisation employs 251.3 full-time equivalent staff.
- 20** The overall revenue budget for 2008/09 was £12.4 million, with an annual reserve budget of £42.9 million. The gross capital budget for 2007/08 is £11.6 million. Balances stand at £3.9 million general fund. The district council tax for a Band D property is £1,416 for 2008/09, which is slightly above the national average.
- 21** Local Government Review in Suffolk has created some uncertainty about the future for the Council. Forest Heath has worked with the other districts of St Edmundsbury and Waveney to present a West Suffolk Unitary bid. They are working with these partners to engage with their communities, as well as maintaining on-going dialogue with the Boundary Committee to ensure the business case is fit for purpose.
- 22** The Council has a number of key partners both regionally and locally. It is an active partner within the Suffolk Strategic Partnership (SSP) and the Western Suffolk Local Strategic Partnership (WSLSP) which deliver the Local Area Agreement. It has a range of local partnerships to deliver its priorities: Kings' Forest Housing manages the transferred housing stock; Anglia Community Leisure Trust manages the leisure centres; Anglia Revenues Partnership delivers the revenues and benefits service; and there is a waste partnership with St Edmundsbury Borough Council.
- 23** The Audit Commission assessed the Council as 'fair' in 2004 (on a five point scale of poor, weak, fair, good and excellent). The Council has aspired to be good since and has adopted the strap line: Changing for good....Aiming at Excellence. The Council has undertaken a number of reviews including work with the local government Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA). The recommendations from these reviews were incorporated into the Council's improvement plan.

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

Ambition

- 24** The Council is performing well in this area. The Council and its partners have a shared vision for the district, based on a range of data and information gathered through consultation and partnership working. There is clear alignment between the community strategy, Transforming Suffolk 2008 and new Local Area Agreement 2 (LAA2) themes. These themes clearly link to Council ambitions, which are underpinned by plans to ensure delivery. Stakeholders and partners recognise the Council as a key player in the sub-region, providing effective community leadership.
- 25** The clear shared vision for the district is understood by councillors, staff and other stakeholders. The West Suffolk Local Strategic Partnership (WSLSP) community strategy, Making life better (2006/16), sets out a vision for the West Suffolk area. The ambitions for the sub region and related roles and responsibilities were developed and agreed by the Council with its partners. The Leader sits on the Suffolk Strategic Partnership (SSP) Board, the Chief Executive is on the SSP panel. The vision is underpinned by four objectives: maximise the potential of all children and young people; develop and maintain a safe, strong and sustainable community; create and support healthier communities; and develop a prosperous and sustainable economy. The Council's ambitions clearly flow from these sub-regional objectives. These ambitions are communicated internally through the performance management system and externally through a range of communications media. Stakeholders are clear about Council ambitions and those for the district.
- 26** The Council's ambitions provide long, medium and short term focus for achievements which are translated into activities delivered via a range of plans and partnerships. Transforming Suffolk and Making Life Better outline the long term direction for the district whilst the corporate plan (2008/12) sets the change programme for the medium term. The revised corporate plan was developed following consultation with partners, stakeholders, community groups, and the public during 2007. It provides a shared vision for the future of the district and has clear links to the community strategy. The plan is transformed into short term actions via the Annual Delivery Plan 2008/09, service plans, action plans, and committee programmes. These corporate targets are also used to inform the personal development programmes for officers and councillors. Therefore all stakeholders understand how the Council intends to achieve its ambitions.

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

- 27** Working with partners, the Council is demonstrating good community leadership. It has been proactive in consulting and advising local residents on potential options and outcomes for the Local Government Review. It sought their views on the options and has encouraged them to contact the Boundary Commission to obtain further information. Senior officers and councillors are actively involved in strategic partnerships and attend community events. Member champions are involved in a variety of external groups such as the Suffolk Waste Partnership and visibly promote and support local events for example, by attending the Council-run family festival Lark in the Park which showcases local activities and food and drink. Work undertaken with the West Suffolk Community Safety Partnership (WSCSP), such as the local impact days and preventative schemes designed to limit antisocial behaviour is improving the quality of life and providing good leadership to the community.
- 28** The Council and its partners understand and effectively share data on local needs. They are using the Suffolk Observatory and a variety of consultations such as One Voice Suffolk and Suffolk Speaks to identify need. Specific plans set out activities to address identified local need. The Council has worked with Keystone Development Trust to explore the needs of new communities in Newmarket. This work has informed the direction of the Council's community cohesion working group and has resulted in the start up of surgeries for migrant workers. In addition, data is shared effectively between partners, for example information on night time crime risk areas. Sharing data is leading to more joined up and effective multi-agency actions.
- 29** The Council's partnership working is effective. It is working with a range of partners through agreed joint strategies. For example, it works with the WSLSP to deliver a wide range of community projects, such as put a cork in it aimed to reduce harm caused by drugs and alcohol and a project supporting young carers dealing with a family member with alcohol dependency. People over sixty years old at risk of fuel poverty are helped through a 'warmer homes' project. The Council is contributing to the multi-sector Brecks Partnership which is raising the profile of the Brecks area as a tourist destination. It has also encouraged the development of tourist attractions such as a farm shop and tea room in Elveden. Local people and the local economy are benefiting from this joint working.
- 30** The Council has effectively addressed the weak community engagement that was identified in the 2004 CPA. It has shaped its ambitions through data analysis, consultation with communities such as via the bi-monthly Forest Heath News and public meetings and feedback from partner organisations including the WSLSP, the Youth Forum and parish councils. Partners feel well informed and state that the Council has actively consulted with them. There is a community engagement strategy and a consultation planning tool to ensure that initiatives are co-ordinated. The Council has worked with partners to enable the voice of potentially disadvantaged groups to be heard. In partnership with Optua, the Suffolk disability charity, and the Ipswich and Suffolk Council for Race Equality. It created a stakeholder group to give views on the new corporate priorities. A disability forum is also actively involved in all major projects such as the Newmarket Leisure Centre. The Council is currently developing a process to ensure that formal feedback is provided post consultation. Partners, stakeholders and communities feel better informed and consulted.

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

- 31** The Council has learnt from its experience of introducing an unpopular change. For example, the decision to introduce car parking charges in Newmarket was initially very unpopular. The Council established a Newmarket Parking Strategy Working Group which liaised with local businesses and interested parties to explain the Council's position. A pay and display system was subsequently introduced. This provides better parking for shoppers, rather than for commuters. However, the Council learnt that it was important to plan consultation with local people and to have a strategic relationship with the local media. It now provides more press briefings. This improved communication is helping with contentious issues such as the decision to cease cash collection for council services. Public reaction has been more balanced and media coverage has been helpful in informing users where cash payments can be made following the closure.
- 32** The Council has taken steps to ensure that ambitions are realistic and sustainable. Its capital programme is assessed and resources are allocated against corporate priorities. Following the transfer of its housing stock in 2004, the Council has built up its reserves. It is also strengthening the approach to asset management to ensure future investment is sustainable through the effective management, acquisition and disposal of assets. Since 2007 it has published a clear asset plan, appointed to an asset management post and created an asset management group consisting of councillors and officers. It is too early to assess the outcomes from this approach to asset management, but a good financial structure to support the Council's ambitions is in place.

Prioritisation

- 33** The Council is performing well in this area. It identified a new set of priorities in January 2008, based on local need and consultation with stakeholders, partners and the wider community. Robust plans are in place to deliver these priorities with service plans being underpinned by action plans. Clear decision making is taking place against the new priorities and resources have been shifted to support some of these priorities.
- 34** The priorities in the new corporate plan 2008/2012 reflect the outcomes of consultation whilst maintaining alignment to LAA themes. They also reflect national policy, regional and county wide issues in balance with local concerns such as outreach projects for the young. The seven new priorities set in January 2008 are:
- affordable, accessible housing;
 - outreach projects for young people;
 - community engagement and communication;
 - street scene and the environment;
 - community safety;
 - transport issues; and
 - economic regeneration.

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

- 35** The Council takes an inclusive approach to setting its priorities. Stakeholders were consulted on the new corporate plan including the WSLSP, partner organisations, parish councils, communities and staff. The Council communicates its priorities clearly to the public. It has increased the production of the Forest Heath News to bi-monthly, and communicates via a monthly Parish Briefing and a Parish Forum. The website clearly sets out priorities and ambitions for the district as well as highlighting opportunities for the public to get involved in consultation. This results in widespread contribution to, and understanding of, the priorities.
- 36** There is a good framework for ensuring that priorities are cascaded throughout the Council. Priorities and key partnership plans including 'Transforming Suffolk 2008' and 'Making Life Better' are clearly supported by key strategies and plans within the Council. The medium term financial strategy (MTFS) is clearly aligned to priorities, and action plans within key strategies state the priorities which they support. The Council has improved its objective setting and corporate and service planning since 2004. It has a new Annual Delivery Plan which specifies objectives and milestones and sets out success criteria, all of which are linked back to the corporate plan. Action plans clearly focus on the delivery of priorities. These action plans are monitored at service team meetings. Individual objectives from the action plans are cascaded to staff through the appraisal process and progress is discussed at bi-annual review meetings. All levels within the organisation are therefore clear how they contribute to the delivery of the Council's priorities.
- 37** The Council is clear about what are, and what are not, priorities and it moves investment into the priority areas. Council decisions are evaluated against corporate priorities, and how projects will contribute to priorities is systematically assessed against a matrix. The capital programme, MTFS and performance management are based around the new priorities and service plans are aligned to them. When new areas for investment are identified they have to meet strict criteria to assess the contribution they will make to the delivery of priorities. The Council has moved investment away from lesser priorities such as pest control and dog wardens to fund the appointment of a community engagement officer. This supports the new corporate priority of community engagement. Priorities are thus systematically used to shape investment and disinvestment decisions.
- 38** Priorities are well communicated within the Council. The 2006 employee survey demonstrates that internal communication has improved, with 93 per cent of respondees agreeing or tending to agree that they were clear what was expected of them. This compared to 89 per cent in 2004. Staff receive a monthly 'Core Brief' and a bi-monthly on-line staff newsletter 'Foghorn'. A Staff Development Group, which includes a member of management team meets once a month. The Chief Executive gives staff briefings - these have recently been weekly to address concerns arising from the Local Government Review (LGR). The 2006 survey showed significant improvement in two-way communications, with 70 per cent feeling able to express their views compared to 36 per cent in 2004. Satisfaction with the effectiveness of communication within teams improved from 74 per cent in 2004 to 81 per cent.

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

- 39** The Council focuses on what matters to its communities. It has driven through some difficult projects in order to meet community needs. Despite significant delays to the major projects of Newmarket Leisure Centre and Brandon Healthy Living Centre, it maintained its focus and addressed issues as they arose. For example, it has overcome difficulties in order to deliver the Newmarket Leisure Centre, as consultation had indicated that local people wanted better leisure centres. In July 2007 the Council set up the Anglia Community Leisure Trust and delayed the launch date in order to carry out an additional contractual value for money exercise. This shows that the council has been thorough and tenacious in delivering projects which support its priorities.
- 40** Strategic plans are mostly supported by clear action plans with SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely) targets which are incorporated into the performance management reporting process. Following changes in corporate priorities in 2007 and as part of the Council's ongoing review mechanism, supporting strategies are being updated. The Annual Delivery Plan and service plans have actions plans which set out key milestones, outcomes and owners. They are reviewed via team meetings or at Corporate Management Team. However a small number of strategies have yet to be updated and consequently their action plans lack some SMART details, for example, the home energy conservation strategy, and workforce development action plans. The lack of SMART targets in some areas means that the Council cannot be sure that action plans are fully delivering their intended outcomes.
- 41** The Council is improving its work on meeting the diverse needs of the local population. Action plans are increasingly reflective of the needs of different groups, such as people with disabilities, migrant workers and gypsies and travellers. It is working with One Voice Suffolk (OVS) and Suffolk Speaks to better engage with BME groups. Through partnership it offers diverse activities such as promoting Black History Month as part of its arts programme and the ongoing provision of specific swim sessions for those with disabilities. Recommendations from the on-going rollout of equality impact assessments (EIA) have resulted in changes such as free removal of bulky waste for benefits claimants and translation services at all customer access points. However, the Council does not consistently differentiate data or feedback by user. For example, the health improvement strategy identifies the disadvantaged wards most at risk from poor health but does not analyse this further into demographic groups most affected by various types of ill health. Outside the Diversity Working Group, there is no wider equalities body other than the disability forum and informal service-led contact. Although this is an improving picture, the Council cannot currently demonstrate that its actions systematically meet the needs of all sections of the community.

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

Capacity

- 42** The Council is performing adequately in this area. It has responded to the 2004 CPA recommendation to improve councillor's roles and responsibilities by realigning committees, offering more training and introducing member champions. Its investment in strengthening corporate capacity has been recognised by stakeholders, partners and staff. There is effective leadership and a good approach to workforce planning and ICT. The Council uses partnership and procurement well. However, project and risk management are not fully embedded, scrutiny is continuing to develop and the Council cannot yet commission from the voluntary sector. The Council's management is not reflective of the local population.
- 43** There is effective managerial and political leadership. The Chief Executive is providing strong representation on a range of external partnerships, and the senior management team work well together on corporate and cross-cutting issues. There is a culture of openness and respect, with clear divisions between strategic and operational roles and responsibilities. There are clear decision making processes in place and forward planning is structured around ambitions and priorities. The independently chaired standards committee and the monitoring officer promote and maintain ethical standards. These arrangements ensure there are constructive working relationships in place.
- 44** The Council has effectively strengthened capacity to support priorities in some key areas. Since 2004 it has reviewed its management structure and appointed a number of key posts and teams. There is a new procurement team, and more corporate performance management staff. This has led to joint procurement of materials within the Council's legal partnership and a well understood approach to performance management, with regular reporting. More recently, the Council has added a new Overview and Scrutiny Manager, and has used Local Authority Business Growth Incentive money to add a Town Centre Manager and a Business Support Manager to the economic development team. Capacity for consultation and community engagement has been improved through the appointment of a community engagement officer. The improved capacity in key areas has been noted in feedback from staff, partners and other stakeholder groups.

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

- 45** Councillors are well informed and involved. The twelve member champions have added to the Council's capacity by providing a more informed challenge of performance for example, by carrying out research for service reviews. They are also engaging with partner organisations. Councillors now have a robust induction programme delivered over twelve weeks. There are on-going learning and development sessions before committees on key topics. The Council gained an Elected Member Development Charter in 2008, and has participated in the IDeA member mentoring programme. Using Capacity Building East funding, the Council and partners have undertaken a performance improvement programme. This quality of debate and decision making has been improved.
- 46** Financial capacity is sufficiently strong for the Council to achieve its corporate ambitions. Budget challenges are being managed and prioritised and the Council has a sound medium term financial strategy. External funding has been secured. For example, developers' contributions have increased through a new approach which has led to £258,000 specifically for play and open space. Planning Delivery Grant has provided £204,000 which has funded improved software to support the Local Development Framework programme and a specialist monitoring officer. By securing investment the Council is increasing its capacity to deliver its priorities.
- 47** The Council has an effective approach to managing value for money (VfM) and delivering efficiencies. The Audit Commission has judged it as good for its use of resources, and adequate for VfM. The Council has a VfM tool in place to help budget holders consistently assess potential savings. It has also strengthened performance management and successfully reviewed processes for efficiencies. Introduction of fully electronic committee papers and distribution, saved £23,000 in the first year. The Council has exceeded its annual efficiency targets with cumulative savings to 2007/08 of £1.420 million, of which £1.035 million was cashable. It is using shared services to make savings whilst improving service levels. For example, the Council receives £150,000 return on its investment annually, and the Suffolk Waste Partnership has brought in substantial government funding to buy wheelie bins and improve infrastructure. This approach to assessing potential for efficiencies and working in partnership enables the Council to keep service costs down for local residents, without reducing service quality.
- 48** The Council has a systematic approach to ensuring it has the staff capacity to deliver its ambitions and priorities. The trade union was involved in the development of the five year workforce plan. The plan is fully resourced and sets out objectives based on benchmarked and research information on the local district. It addresses skills shortages and ensures that staff can progress within the Council. The workforce plan is supported by a clear appraisal system and competency framework which provides a wide range of training opportunities. This includes competency related training but also offers other skills, for example in literacy and numeracy, and opportunities to pursue voluntary work during office hours. Manager's competencies were approved in January 2008 and include personal awareness; working with others; leadership; developing the authority and performance management. Through improving staff capacity, the Council has strengthened its ability to deliver its priorities and to manage change.

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

- 49** Staff are encouraged to innovate and the Council recognises good suggestions. The Bright Ideas Scheme allows staff to submit ideas for improving ways of working. Ideas adopted include publishing photographs of staff members, a glossary of acronyms on the Intranet to help new staff and provision of office recycling facilities. The staff recognition scheme is viewed positively by staff who feel it effectively acknowledges extra effort. The staff survey of 2006 showed a 19 per cent increase in satisfaction since 2004 with the employee recognition award. These schemes help staff engage in the overall improvement agenda.
- 50** The Council has improved access to services via a variety of means. ICT is facilitating service improvement and customer care. The Council's fully transactional website is easy to use and its text can be enlarged. The website includes on-line planning and My Neighbourhood. This is innovative and gives customers online access to a variety of local services and information based on the postcode or address details supplied. Printed information also facilitates access. The Guide to Council Services is provided in four languages, English, Portuguese, Polish and Russian. Key documents are offered in Braille, and large font format as well as being available on the web pages. The Council has installed chip and pin units in customer access points and enabled different methods of payment for customers. It has provided customers with quicker and cheaper access to bus passes through Faredeal, using web camera technology. Consequently local people are able to access information and services more easily.
- 51** The Council works with the voluntary and community groups and is taking steps to build capacity in this sector. At service level, joint working with USAFE, and with 'Friends of' groups, has produced positive outcomes, particularly in environmental initiatives. The emergency planning service works well with the voluntary sector, for example WRVS, Salvation Army, and Churches Together. The LSP board has created a community chest of small grants for the voluntary sector and the Council has reorganised its 'small grant' arrangements to enable community groups to take local action. The Council is now developing a corporate approach and the new community engagement officer is strengthening links with local groups. The Council also allows staff time off to do voluntary work, but lack of capacity within the voluntary and community sector is still an issue.
- 52** Scrutiny is developing. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee does not provide consistently robust challenge. There are some examples of changes as a result of scrutiny, for example in capital project monitoring. Scrutiny has also made recommendations on the partnership with Anglia Community Leisure Trust. However, the Council recognised this as an area for development and has reviewed scrutiny structures. This resulted in the creation of a new Performance and Audit Committee in May 2008. The Committee is providing a clearer challenge on performance and financial reports and has taken on risk management and improvement planning responsibilities. In addition the increased role of member champions is improving councillor involvement in performance scrutiny.

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

- 53** The Council is taking effective steps to improve project management. It has adopted a PRINCE2 methodology and uses an electronic project management system for new projects called Work2gether. It has a proportional approach to projects and reporting structures depending on the complexity of the project. There are clear roles and responsibilities for projects and a scoring matrix ensures that decisions on projects are made in line with priorities. However, some of the processes are still bedding in and the strengthened approach has yet to complete a full cycle for a major project. Therefore the Council has limited experience of project evaluation and ensuring learning is captured and acted upon.
- 54** Risk management is developing. The Council has acted on feedback from risk specialists to identify improvements to service and strategic risks. It has merged strategic and corporate risk registers to improve focus. Service managers regularly review risk at their monthly meetings and risks are reported to the Performance and Audit Committee. Risk matrices are included in all project and service plans. The Council plans to systematically capture service plans on the performance management system to ensure that action taken to manage risk is regularly reviewed. Consequently, management of risk is improving but not embedded, and work is still progressing to ensure that risks are systematically updated and mitigated.
- 55** The Council is developing a strategic approach to diversity but its own management team are not reflective of the makeup of the local community. The Diversity Officer Working Group is led by the Head of Community Services, and meets monthly to monitor the implementation of the equality plan. A member champion has been appointed and a strategic director is responsible for delivering the equality plan, with the objective of working towards Level 3 of the Equality Standard. However, workforce planning has not led to a management team which reflects the local population or society in general. Women, people with disabilities and people from ethnic minorities are underrepresented amongst the top five per cent of earners within the Council. This risks limiting the perspective of the Council's decision makers and the extent to which it can lead by example.

Performance management

- 56** The Council is performing well in this area. Performance management was identified as an area for improvement in the 2004 CPA and focussed investment and resources have created robust frameworks to ensure that learning internally, from others and from partners is used to drive improvement. An effective performance management framework is being used to monitor and challenge performance. Officers and councillors are clear about their roles. Partnerships are effectively performance managed and learning is used to drive improvement. Formal user feedback and complaints are used to improve services.

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

- 57** The Council has effectively embedded a performance culture across the organisation. Its performance management framework is understood by Councillors and officers at all levels. There is a clear and comprehensive performance management guide for staff and councillors. The performance management intranet site provides access to the latest dashboard reports, updates on key indicators and findings from reviews as well as wider 'how to' information. Since 2005 the Council has developed its use of the performance management software package. The tool is web based and incorporates all national and local performance indicators as well as progress on the annual delivery plan and action plans. Dashboards are produced monthly and quarterly for service heads and councillors. Live data is presented to management team meetings on a weekly basis to inform discussions. As a result there is clear decision making based on performance data.
- 58** Service planning and financial planning are aligned and this is well applied. The overall budget setting process is linked to the medium term financial strategy which is clearly linked back to priorities. An integrated business plan process is linked to the budget timetable which enables planned service delivery to be considered alongside potential growth and/or movement in resources to priority areas. Resourced business plans are signed off by heads of services and the management team and presented to councillors for adoption. Performance and financial information are presented at the same time but the Council has yet to integrate them in a single performance report. The Council is able to review the impact of financial decisions on performance.
- 59** Responsibilities for the performance management framework are understood and applied. There are explicit links between the Council's ambitions and service plans. The annual performance plan sets out targets for the next year, including local, regional and national, which then feed into service plans, team plans and into individual targets which are agreed through the appraisal process. Local indicators are set to reflect priorities. Performance information is reviewed monthly by heads of service and reported quarterly to the performance and audit committee. This has been further strengthened through the focus of the member champions who regularly meet with heads of service to review performance and explore issues. Staff are fully aware of the targets they are working to and know whether they are, or are not, meeting their targets.
- 60** Co-operation between services is leading to improvement. The Council is using its officers' skills to focus on delivery of corporate outcomes rather than just focusing on service areas. All the major projects being undertaken by the Council are led by a cross service working party. This includes officers and councillors and, where appropriate, partners and community representatives. Cross departmental working and joint delivery with partners is being effectively used within the environment department. Joint warranting with the Health and Safety Executive, as part of a countywide initiative, means that officers are authorised to undertake enforcement on Health and Safety Executive sites and vice versa for Health and Safety Executive officers. Private sector housing officers and other environmental health officers also work jointly to share knowledge and signpost users to other services available such as Warm Front. The Council's approach to joined up working across departments is leading to increased efficiency and improved quality of life for local residents.

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

- 61** The Council effectively learns from external sources. Since the last CPA inspection it has worked to address the recommendations. This has led to reassessment of the corporate priorities and a number of joint appointments, for example in procurement. Since August 2007 the local Safer Neighbourhood Team has been located at the Council office. This has led to improved knowledge sharing. The Council is also using benchmarking data to share service improvement. It belongs to SPARSE, a benchmarking partnership of over 80 rural authorities, and is involved in a profiling programme that reviews performance, for example in housing benefit and planning.
- 62** Internally learning is effectively shared through a range of media. The Foghorn newsletter provides short case studies of improvements being achieved in service areas. Personal development reviews lead to staff undertaking courses linked to priorities and competencies. Councillors produce briefing notes following attendance at conferences, seminars and training. These are published on Sharepoint, which is used to capture and share learning across the organisation. The open approach to sharing learning supports the delivery of priorities.
- 63** The Council is proactively seeking opportunities to improve service efficiency and performance. It is using strategic partnerships to deliver service improvements. For example, the Anglia Revenue Partnership received the Municipal Journal 2007 Efficiency Achievement of the year award as well as the Beacon Award for transforming service delivery in 2006. The partnership with St. Edmundsbury Borough Council (SEBC) for the servicing of the environment vehicle fleet has led to reduced maintenance costs whilst improving overall standards. Business process re-engineering methodology has led to changes in service provision which include: reallocating staff. This created a £60,000 saving over two years. The average days taken for disabled facilities grant reduced by one third. ICT helpdesk time taken to resolve queries reduced from 130 hours to 10 providing on-going revenue savings of £45,000. Local residents are getting more efficient services for their money.
- 64** Performance management in existing partnerships is working well. The Council has used a partnership evaluation toolkit to review several partnerships. The West Suffolk Community Safety Partnership (WSCSP) has an open and challenging performance management approach. Targets have been developed in partnership and are monitored via Suffolk County Council with reports being produced quarterly for each authority detailing current performance against priority areas, trend and comparative position. However, more recent partnerships such as the Anglia Community Leisure Trust, are still formulating performance management arrangements. To date five performance indicators are in place, reflecting national indicators such as participation, the need to increase coaching and the involvement of the voluntary sector but local priority indicators have yet to be agreed.

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

65 The Council's approach to user feedback is not fully developed. Service standards are published on the website but they are inconsistent in terms of the detail provided. The standards were developed following consultation and benchmarking with other authorities. Some service areas clearly define service levels with targets but others are not so specific. Performance in complaint handling (ombudsman) is inconsistent. This was at the level of the worst performers in 2005/06 but moved to the top performance level in 2006/07. However, in 2007/08 this deteriorated due a high level of complaints on the same complex planning issue, combined with an unavoidable gap in Council capacity. There are now signs that performance has recovered. There is an established process for dealing with formal complaints but no corporate system to secure learning from informal complaints and comments. Response to informal complaints depends on action within individual services and as a result learning is not shared corporately or with councillors. The Council has recognised this as an area for improvement and is undertaking work to identify those complaints which cut across different services.

What has been achieved?

Achievement and Improvement

66 The Council is performing well in this area. Effective prioritisation has allowed it to achieve well against the priorities that it set in the 2003/2007 corporate plan which were:

- vibrant town centres;
- a healthier Forest Heath;
- a cleaner environment; and
- accessible, affordable housing.

As the Council has only recently developed its new priorities, progress has been assessed against these former priorities.

The Council has delivered an ambitious level of affordable homes, and improved the local environment. Partnership has led to improved service, for example through a number of projects to help create vibrant town centres and to make Forest Heath healthier. Services have also improved their performance against best value performance indicators and responded well to customer feedback.

67 There has been steady improvement against best value performance indicators. In 2007/08 Forest Heath had 28 per cent of performance indicators in the best performing 25 per cent, against the average for all district councils of 33 per cent. This was an improvement on the previous year's figure of 27 per cent. Over the last three years 50 per cent of performance indicators improved against an average of 58 per cent for similar councils. Between 2006/07 and 2007/08, the Council improved in 59 per cent of performance indicators, at the average for district councils. During 2007/08 internal capacity issues affected performance against some indicators which deteriorated, for example, response to complaints, council tax collected, major planning applications and other planning applications. These issues have now been addressed.

68 Since the 2004 CPA, the Council has gained recognition for some of its services. In 2006/07, it achieved two Beacon status awards for transforming service delivery through partnership. These recognised the Suffolk Waste Partnership work on diverting waste from landfill and the Anglia Revenues Partnership in conjunction with Breckland and East Cambridgeshire District Councils, which provides local taxation and benefits services.

What has been achieved?

- 69** The Council has improved services in response to resident feedback. Resident satisfaction with services is generally below average. The BVPI Survey 2006/07 shows an overall drop in service satisfaction to 55 per cent from 61 per cent in 2003/04. In particular there was a decline in satisfaction with waste collection to 77 per cent 2006/07 from 90 per cent 2003/04. In response to this the Council restructured their waste and street scene team in 2007/08; participated in local campaigns to address key waste and recycling issues; and moved resources from the 2008/09 budget to develop a new litter hit squad to provide rapid response. Satisfaction with parks and open spaces deteriorated to 67 per cent in 2006/07 from 72 per cent in 2003/04. This has been addressed through a number of activities supporting community groups to develop local open spaces and improve access for all. An independent survey of users and non-users commissioned by the Council in May 2008 indicated that satisfaction had improved, with 78 per cent of consultees being satisfied with parks and open spaces within the district.
- 70** Effective prioritisation has led to progress on the desired outcomes. The Council has demonstrated that it can focus on its priorities and has good planning and delivery structures. As a result it has delivered the following outcomes against the 2003/07 corporate plan priorities.

Vibrant town centres

- 71** The Council is using partnerships to enhance town centres. The Council has worked with a consortium of organisations to create the Home of Horse Racing Trust with the aim of maximising economic development based on Newmarket's unique association with horse racing. The Council is co-ordinating the £12 million project which will provide improved visitor facilities at the National Stud, a transport link between visitor attractions and raise the profile of the town nationally. The Council restored Palace House Mews in 2006 at a cost of £370,000. The Mews is now being used by a variety of community groups as well as providing a corporate and function venue. Since the restoration visitor numbers have increased leading to additional income for the authority; in 2007/08 there were 305 events held. In addition, the use of the Mews has helped to increase visit to the Palace House from 4,003 in 2005/06 to 7,146 in 2006/07 and 10,551 in 2007/08. Palace House also houses the Tourist Information Centre which received a Highly Commended award for Excellence in the Regional Enjoy England awards in 2005 and 2006.
- 72** The Council is delivering effective joint projects to improve town centre vibrancy. The WSLSP put a cork in it campaign, included underage test purchasing, bar staff training and a high profile media campaign. The campaign shows some success, for example 79 per cent of premises did not sell to underage drinkers against a 'no sale' target of 60 per cent. The Council accessed government funding for safer food better business, enabling it to inspect approximately 300 premises and arrange individualised training with 60 smaller businesses, resulting in little enforcement action being required.

73 The Council is investing in capital projects to enhance its main town centres. Part of a wider regeneration project for Mildenhall saw the creation of a new bus station. As well as improving the visual appearance of the area, this provides a safer environment for users. Newmarket has benefited from increased shopping facilities to improve the offering to visitors, supported by the introduction of a park and ride scheme and a subsidised townrider bus system. New toilets have been opened in Newmarket town centre. The old toilet building is being redeveloped to expand the current customer access point as well as releasing a site, to enable commercial expansion of The Guineas shopping centre.

A healthier Forest Heath

74 The Council is addressing the healthy living agenda effectively. Forest Heath is one of the best performers for participation in sports and active recreation and has above average levels of volunteering in sports and active recreation. The WSLSP Active 4 life project has resulted in significant health benefits for those completing the ten week course. An evaluation of the scheme undertaken in March 2008 found that 1,369 people across West Suffolk were referred to the Active 4 Life scheme between February 2004 and October 2007. Participants completing the scheme showed statistically significant and clinically important improvements over ten weeks. However promoting leisure to those with disabilities has met with limited success, for example the Be Active scheme aimed to get 108 people across West Suffolk involved in exercise but failed to achieve this with only 49 registered across the County, of whom 17 are in Forest Heath. In order to improve this, the Council have established a disability focus group for sports and leisure and are working in partnership with other districts and Optua, the Suffolk disability charity, on a health inclusion programme. This was only introduced in 2008 so clear outcomes have yet to be seen.

75 There has been effective use of partnership to address substance misuse. The Western Compass project is improving quality of life for drug users classed as prolific offenders. Delivered in partnership with the WSCSP, the project provides users with a comprehensive care package following a lifestyle assessment. As a result of this the district has seen a reduction in acquisitive crime by 26 per cent. The scheme has proved so successful it is being integrated into the national drugs intervention programme. The Council has been proactive in supporting young carers of those with alcohol dependency. A support network has been established across West Suffolk which provides respite opportunities as well as social events. Feedback from these events has been very positive and demonstrates the value this network provides.

76 The Council works effectively in partnership with local voluntary community groups to improve access to open spaces. In partnership with Lark Angling and Preservation Society the Council is helping to secure grant funding for the installation of surfaced footpaths and wheelchair accessible fishing platforms. Using developer contributions the Council has worked with Lakenheath Playing Fields Association to address an identified lack of publicly accessible play provision and public open space. Work is currently ongoing to provide new play equipment, a hard surfaced ball court and a skate park. Brandon Community Groups have worked with the Council to deliver a multi-purpose games area for tennis and football. This partnership working is helping to improve opportunities for local people to adopt healthier lifestyles.

What has been achieved?

A cleaner environment

- 77** The Council performs well on recycling and is having some impact on waste reduction. It is among the best performers and recycled or composted 46.4 per cent of its waste in 2007/08. It has focused on reducing the amount of waste produced and this fell from 425 kgs in 2005/06 to 412.5 kgs in 2007/08. Waste campaigns and education have supported this reduction. The Suffolk Waste Partnership has delivered a countywide promotional campaign entitled Sort It for Suffolk. This campaign used a variety of media such as press, local radio and bus and billboard adverts to encourage recycling and reduction. However, the rate of reduction of waste in Forest Heath is below average compared to other councils, and the Council does not promote home composting effectively to prevent green waste unnecessarily entering the waste stream. Overall, the Council has made it easy for residents to recycle and is starting to reduce tonnage to landfill.
- 78** The Council is improving street cleanliness and this is enhanced by joint working. It has a joint team with St Edmundsbury for clearing litter on the A14/A11 trunk roads. This was a response to local demand and has been well received. The new rapid response team deals promptly with litter and fly tipping. The most recent audited customer satisfaction data for street cleanliness was in 2006/07 when 74 per cent of local people were satisfied with the cleanliness of the district. This is above the average level for English councils. Community involvement has added capacity in this area. For example, the Council has also established Community Crew - young volunteers who help clean up campaigns. This is funded through the WSLSP and to date they have improved the environment at Brandon and also at the Red Lodge Millennium Centre. Consequently the local environment is becoming noticeably cleaner.
- 79** The Council's progress on environmental enforcement is developing. It is starting to carry out environmental enforcement effectively, and has held an environmental impact day. This has been supported by publicity. It has a score on the doors scheme for food licensing and recently there have been some high profile prosecutions. A recent example of prosecution which has received good media coverage concerns a landlord of a house in multiple occupancy. On the other hand, the Council has not used fixed penalty notices to deter people from littering or allowing their dogs to foul. Enforcement is strengthening and the related publicity is improving public awareness of the issue.
- 80** The Council manages biodiversity and the natural environment well. It supports community action such as trapping to remove aggressive non-native red crayfish from the River Lark to restore balance to the local habitat. It has also facilitated access to Brandon Country Park (managed and maintained in conjunction with Suffolk County Council). Almost one quarter of the district consists of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and 91.3 per cent of this is classified as 'in a favourable condition'.
- 81** The Council has not developed clear baselines to improve its own carbon reduction. Independent consultants have carried out an environmental audit, and the Council is a signatory to the Suffolk Carbon Reduction partnership (CRED) and to the Nottingham Declaration. However it has not made as much progress as other districts in the East of England. Lack of clear action plans has meant that there has not been substantial progress in achieving climate change outcomes.

Accessible, affordable housing

- 82** The Council is proactive in facilitating affordable housing. It has ensured provision through its land bank sites, selling nine sites across the district to the Flagship Housing Group. The Council delivered 132 new affordable homes in 2005/06 and 259 during 2006/07. Using legal agreements in 2005/06, 37 per cent of new homes were affordable as compared to the adopted policy minimum of 25 per cent. The minimum requirement has increased to 35 per cent as part of the Local Development Framework. Affordable housing units represent a significant percentage of housing when compared to other councils, helping local people to secure homes in the district. The Council is also seeking to ensure future provision through acquiring housing now that values have fallen. It negotiates with rental agents to increase access to private sector rental properties such as homes on Studlands Park where there are unoccupied houses which were previously let out to US personnel. This approach ensures that opportunities are not missed.
- 83** The Council has worked effectively to deliver housing for diverse groups within the community. It is redeveloping the Sandy Park Travellers site utilising £750,000 of government grant and £250,000 of Council funds. It has worked with Flagship on the design and tailoring of housing to need, such as the provision of specially adapted bungalows and 'extra care' schemes. This has resulted in housing which is more suited to local need.
- 84** The introduction of choice based lettings has made housing more accessible in Forest Heath. The process is straightforward and gives tenants a broader choice of suitable properties. This is not only in the immediate Forest Heath area, but also across the Cambridge sub region. The strategic housing team includes housing options advisors and customer services staff to guide applicants through the process. The Council is improving temporary accommodation through a new purpose-built facility for families, but at the same time, choice based letting has enabled the take up of stock to be managed more efficiently, so there is less demand for temporary accommodation. The average stay in bed and breakfast accommodation is at the level of the best councils.

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 Forest Heath District Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 10 November to 14 November.
- 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.

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