

Inspection report

December 2004



Comprehensive performance assessment

Forest Heath District Council

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Introduction

- 1 Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) is part of the wider agenda set out in the Local Government White Paper *Strong Local Leadership – Quality Public Services*. The White Paper encourages greater focus on improved services for local people by freeing good councils from central government controls and restrictions, and providing poorer councils with more, and better focused, support for improvement. CPA is the first step in this process, that of making an overall judgement of where each council stands.
- 2 This report presents an analysis of the council's overall performance as well as two short diagnostic assessments which cover important areas of responsibility. It also includes an assessment of the council's benefit service by the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate, and the appointed auditor's assessment of performance on each of the main elements of the code of audit practice. The appendices to this report set out further details on the findings of these assessments and the framework for CPA.
- 3 The official version of this report is also available on the Audit Commission's web site at www.audit-commission.gov.uk. The Audit Commission cannot verify the accuracy of and is not responsible for material contained in this report which has been reproduced by another organisation or individual.

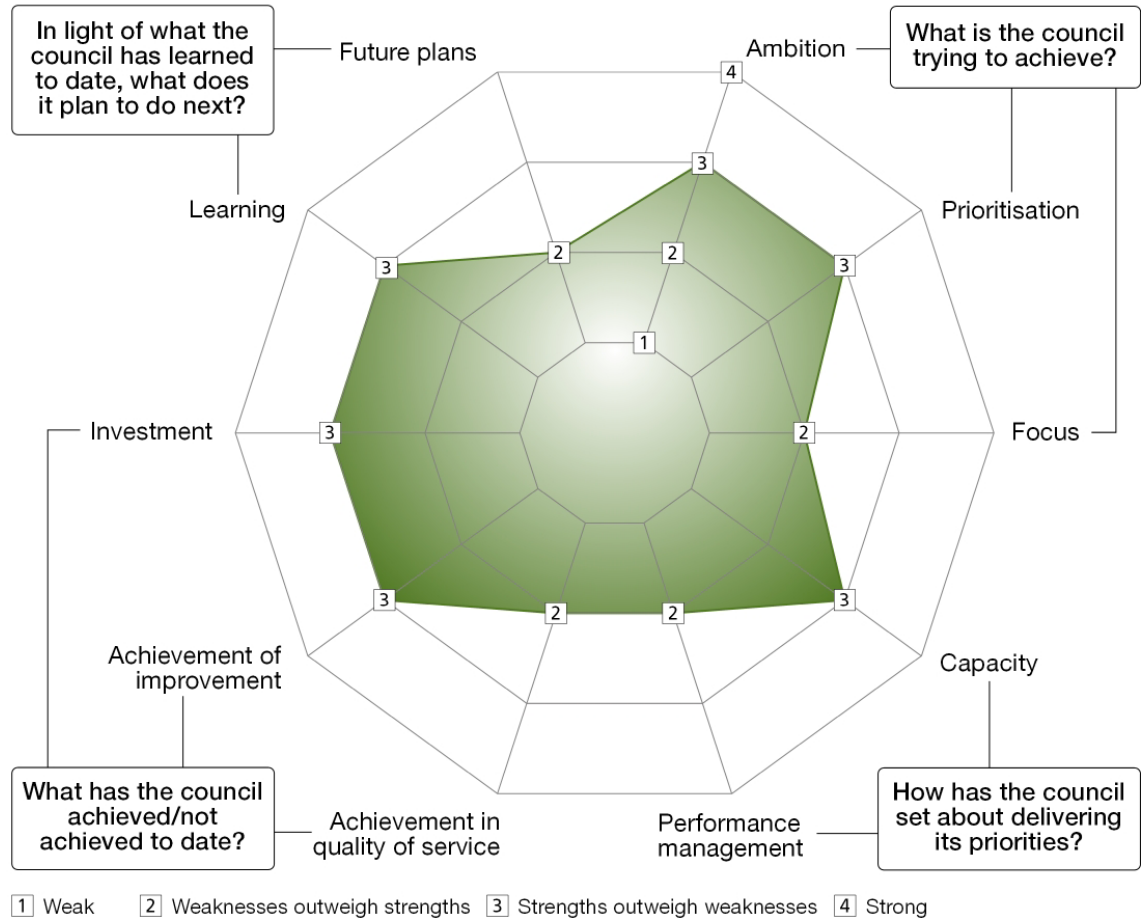
Summary of Comprehensive Performance Assessment judgements

- 4 Forest Heath District Council is a fair council that is showing signs of improvement.
- 5 The council has adopted a vision and objectives for the district supported by four priorities. These give the long term and medium term focus for the council. But supporting plans with measurable targets and outcomes are not in place. Some future plans are in place but others are still being developed, such as the local planning framework. This currently makes it difficult for councillors and officers to monitor how the council is performing in relation to its priorities.
- 6 Forest Heath District Council is a small organisation. But potential capacity issues are being addressed positively. The council has built internal capacity through effective recruitment, additional posts and effective human resource practices. It is making effective use of partnerships through its work with the local strategic partnership (LSP), horseracing industry and the crime and disorder reduction partnership (CDRP) and is beginning to use alternative methods of service delivery. Further work to build this capacity is also in place through training and development, investment in management capacity and through work to improve recruitment and retention.
- 7 Services are of mixed quality. There is high performance in waste services and a high number of homes achieving the decent homes standard. But there is weak performance in housing benefits and a poor track record of delivering affordable housing to meet identified housing need. Improvements in key services are being achieved such as in development control and in improvements to town centres, particularly in Brandon. Customers are generally satisfied with services.
- 8 The use of challenge has helped the council identify its strengths and weaknesses and where it needed to move forward. The resulting improvement plan has led to a large number of plans and strategies recently being developed and to a focus on process improvements. Investment in service delivery is also being made. External funding is helping to deliver some improvements to services and the use of the council's land assets will improve the delivery of affordable homes.
- 9 However, much of the work resulting from the improvement plan is still to be embedded. A performance management framework is in place but is not driving performance. A performance culture is still to be developed.
- 10 Political challenge is immature. Overview and scrutiny has yet to deliver effective challenge, currently focusing heavily on its overview role. Councillors are not always clear about their roles and responsibilities and the current political structure makes it difficult for them to sustain focus on priorities. This is impacting on the quality of decision making and the drive for improvement.

Summary of assessment scores

Top level question	Theme	Grade	Weighted score
What is the council trying to achieve?	Ambition	3	3
	Prioritisation	3	3
	Focus	2	2
How has the council set about delivering its priorities?	Capacity	3	3
	Performance management	2	2
What has the council achieved/not achieved to date?	Achievement in quality of service	2	6
	Achievement of improvement	3	9
	Investment	3	6
In light of what the council has learned to date, what does it plan to do next?	Learning	3	3
	Future plans	2	2
Weighted score			39
Corporate assessment category			Fair

Forest Heath District Council



Recommendations

- 11 It is recommended that the council:
- ◆ actively and promptly shares the findings of this assessment with the public, partner organisations, councillors and staff; and
 - ◆ uses the strengths and weaknesses identified in this report as the basis for its improvement planning.

Context

The locality

- 12 Forest Heath is in north west Suffolk in the eastern region of England, bordering onto both Norfolk and Cambridgeshire counties. The district covers nearly 38,000 hectares and has three main towns, Brandon, Mildenhall and Newmarket. The rest of the population is spread across 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 district was part of the London overspill relocation programme with a significant influx to Mildenhall and Brandon. The two largest US Air Force (USAF) bases in the UK are located in the district, RAF Mildenhall and RAF Lakenheath. The US community, associated with these, is over 9,000 people.
- 13 The population figure of 55,500 was established through the 2001 census but contrasts sharply with the council's 2000/01 estimate of a population of 70,772. This drop from previous statistics is mainly due to differences in the definition of residency. This new figure makes the district the lowest populated in Suffolk. The population is made up of 19.8 per cent under 15 years of age which is the same as the regional and national average and 17.3 per cent of pensionable age which is 1 per cent lower than the regional and national average. Six per cent of the population are from black and minority ethnic communities. But 23.57 per cent are not white British, compared with a regional average of 8.55 per cent and national average of 13.01 per cent. This high figure is due to the US air base staff, European migrant land workers, Middle Eastern trainers and stable staff and a high number of Irish communities connected with the racing and bloodstock industries.
- 14 Apart from the air force bases, the other major economic drivers in the district are tourism, with the Center Parcs Holiday Village at Elveden Forest, and the horseracing and bloodstock industries in Newmarket. Many jobs are low waged with average gross weekly pay low. Unemployment is low at 1.1 per cent, compared to a regional average of 1.8 per cent and national average of 2.5 per cent. The district is ranked as the 264th most deprived out of 354 English councils. However there are pockets of deprivation. Brandon received single regeneration budget (SRB) funding for economic and social programmes.
- 15 The US Air Force bases impact significantly on the district. There is a high demand for rental property to meet the needs of their personnel and families which has an impact on private sector rents. These are up to 50 per cent higher than surrounding districts. The bases also have their own infrastructure of shops, supermarkets and entertainment venues. Consequently they are contributing little directly to the local economy.

The council

- 16 The council has a history of Conservative control. Following the election in May 2003, the Conservatives increased their majority to hold 22 of the 27 seats. The remaining seats are held by three Independents and two members of West Suffolk Independent Alliance. 10 of these elected in May 2003 are new to the council. The council operates a scheme under the alternative arrangements

provided for by the Local Government Act 2000. There are six committees: community services, corporate services, planning, licensing, standards and overview and scrutiny.

- 17 The chief executive is supported by two strategic directors, one responsible for services and one for resources. There are six heads of service. This team of nine form the council's management team. The organisation employs 298.55 full-time equivalent staff.
- 18 The council's overall revenue budget for 2004/05 is £29 million, with a net revenue budget of £6.5 million. The gross capital budget for the next four years is £21 million. Balances stand at £6.93 million general fund. The capital budget will increase substantially after the transfer of housing stock which will be completed in October 2004.
- 19 The council carried out, as requested, a scored self assessment for this inspection against each of the corporate assessment themes. The self assessment was informed by a peer challenge undertaken by the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) in April 2004. Using the Audit Commission's scoring mechanism the council has assessed itself as 'good'.

What is the council trying to achieve?

Ambition

- 20 Strengths outweigh weaknesses.
- 21 The council has a specific long term broad ambition for the district set out in its corporate plan which was adopted in January 2004. A vision: 'to be a modern, highly regarded organisation, enabling and providing high quality services that continuously improve the quality of life for the whole of the Forest Heath community' is supported by four corporate objectives:
 - ◆ Corporate excellence.
 - ◆ Sustainable economic well being.
 - ◆ Social well being.
 - ◆ Environmental well being.
- 22 This vision and objectives have been agreed through work with key stakeholders and through consultation. The council brought together national priorities with local ones, identified through consultation including the Suffolk Speaks panel, plus those of the Western Suffolk local strategic partnership (LSP). Thus the community strategy and the corporate plan have a commonality of issues.
- 23 The vision and objectives reflect the key issues within the area. For example 'sustainable economic well being' clearly links to improving the identified skills shortages in the district and the need to broaden the economic base. High private sector rents is a key issue and the provision of affordable homes is recognised as part of 'environmental well being'. The council recognises the need to take services to rurally isolated communities and to develop e-enabled solutions as part of its 'social well being' objective. Delivering all this will impact positively on the quality of life of local people.
- 24 There is some clarity over how the vision and objectives will be achieved. The best value performance plan links each of the four objectives to the key objectives for each service. For example for 'social well being' community services will support social inclusion. Also 'environmental well being' clearly covers a number of sustainability issues within leisure and culture, planning and environmental services, including energy efficiency, use of land and management of waste. But it is not clear how these will be measured and delivered.
- 25 Staff are clear about the vision and objectives of the council. These make it clear what is most important to the council and are communicated to staff through core briefings and through a series of workshops led by the management team called 'flightpath to success'. As a result there is a high level of staff understanding of, and commitment to, them.
- 26 The council is committed to its community leadership role. The council has led on some important work to invest in the local community and economy. It is working in partnership with a range of partners associated with the horseracing industry including jockey club estates, the national stud and the town council to deliver the

home of horseracing project in Newmarket. Effective leadership has been shown to secure a positive response to large-scale voluntary transfer (LSVT). The council recognised the benefits and effectively shared and involved tenants in the decisions relating to stock transfer.

- 27 The vision and objectives are not robust. Clear, measurable targets and outcomes are largely missing from the corporate plan and best value performance plan to underpin the ambition. Whilst the corporate plan describes how the objectives will be achieved there is a lack of detail and many of the targets are not measurable or outcome focused. This makes it difficult to measure the success of the council.
- 28 Community engagement is not always good. Whilst the council understands what local residents want at a high level, identified through recent consultation, this is not replicated in specific delivery areas. The crime and disorder strategy 2002/05 was based on limited engagement with residents and data from surveys conducted in 1999 of USAF personnel is quoted as one of the main strands of consultation.
- 29 Strategic management is not a strength. Councillors lack strategic capacity and do not robustly challenge committee report recommendations. Management team meetings are not sufficiently focused on delivering better services. However, improvement has been made in this area through the implementation of bi-weekly improvement management teams. These weaknesses are recognised by the council but it is too early for recent investments in councillor development and management training to have had a positive impact.

Prioritisation

- 30 Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area.
- 31 The council has set clear priorities for improvement. Corporate priorities were refined in June 2004 to the four listed in the corporate plan. These are:
- ◆ Vibrant town centres: including regeneration of market towns, promotion of tourism, services for young people, community safety and improved public transport.
 - ◆ A cleaner environment: including public spaces and street environments, waste management, environmental protection, country parks and planning and building control.
 - ◆ A healthier Forest Heath: including leisure centres and pools, Brandon healthy living centre, health inequalities network, supporting people and housing and council tax benefits.
 - ◆ Accessible, affordable homes: including housing strategy and services to meet housing needs, affordable homes programme, planning, building control and economic development.

Although these are general the council has begun in the short time since they were adopted to deliver against them.

- 32 Priorities were developed from a range of intelligence. Existing public consultation from Suffolk Speaks surveys, general satisfaction surveys and specific service consultation were used plus a SIMALTO modelling exercise with local residents. National priorities, goals and priorities of the LSP and commitments to key strategies and initiatives such as local public service agreement commitments were also fed in. The result were 25 ranked priorities which were further refined to 4. This approach ensured that the council are aware of local needs as well as wider priorities and brought them all together in its priorities. But the council did not specifically engage with hard to reach groups such as the local black and minority ethnic communities.
- 33 Internal communication of priorities is effective. The 'flightpath to success' workshops and core briefs plus regular team meetings ensure good communication. Staff are clear about the priorities.
- 34 External communication of priorities is improving. The council uses its quarterly newsletter, 'Forest Heath News' to communicate its priorities to residents and key stakeholders. Partners report that communication is improving enabling the local community to understand what the council is trying to achieve. However, external communication is not always accurate. The Autumn edition of Forest Heath News advises residents that the council provides a free service for the eradication of flea and bedbug infestations. This is incorrect, the council makes a charge of £30.55 for the service. Inaccurate communication about charges is likely to damage the relationship with users of the service.
- 35 Clarity is needed over what are not priorities. General non-priorities have been identified. These include services that could be provided by others and services that do not have to be provided. But specific services or activities which are non-priorities are not clear. Without identifying non-priorities the council may struggle to fulfil all its priorities.
- 36 Resources have not been shifted to priorities or out of non-priority areas. This is partly due to their recent adoption but there is no track record of moving resources to priorities. However it is planned that next year's budget will reflect the priorities more accurately due to the closer linking of service plans to priorities.
- 37 Priorities have not been translated into SMART targets. Currently they do not feed into service plans or other council plans, which is partly due to the timing of the setting of the priorities. They do not yet flow into service plan objectives and individuals' personal targets. Staff may not be aware of their specific contribution to each priority.

Focus

- 38 Weaknesses outweigh strengths.
- 39 The council has been unable to sustain focus to ensure timely delivery of major initiatives. There is a long standing commitment to a new swimming pool in Newmarket but no significant progress has been made, following a number of problems with funding and the site. Also the council has been slow to progress the Red Lodge housing development where 850 homes were to have been delivered by 2001 but to date none have been completed. Work has recently

commenced. Although the council has refocused attention on this in the last three years they have fallen behind their structure plan targets for the delivery of new homes. The council has not maintained focus on these projects and has not effectively managed the delays.

- 40 Elements of the existing political structure do not help to sustain focus on ambition and priorities. The two committees of corporate services and community services cover most functions of the council. However, additional working groups have been set up to look at specific topics such as youth provision, crime reduction and public relations. These were set up to deal with specific issues and do not reflect the new priorities. The overview and scrutiny committee is currently focused on the overview element of its work and is immature in terms of a scrutiny role. Its workplan does not focus on the council's priorities. There is a danger that the council will not remain focused on its priorities.
- 41 The council lost focus on key services during a period of inappropriate behaviour from councillors. Performance in key services such as planning deteriorated and was well within bottom quartile and the service was seriously understaffed before action to improve performance was taken.
- 42 Action planning, follow up delivery and clear guidance to councillors needs to be more consistent. For example, the performance management working group identifies actions but it is not clear who is responsible for delivering these actions and whether the working party is updated on their progress. Reports to committee do not always give clear recommendations or distinguish adequately between options available to the council. This increases chances of losing focus.
- 43 There has been sustained focus in some areas to deliver on what matters to some local people. The council has remained focused on the transfer of its housing stock. In the last two years the council has conducted an options appraisal, significant tenant consultation and a ballot on LSVT. The majority of tenants voted for this transfer which should be complete in October 2004. A clear focus on waste issues has helped the council deliver good recycling performance. A focus on revenues and benefits to improve the service has resulted in an innovative partnership with Breckland District Council to deliver a joint service which has top quartile performance as its objective, but this has not yet delivered improved performance.
- 44 There are examples of where mechanisms to sustain focus have been developed. For example management team has been expanded to include all heads of service which is encouraging managers to think more widely and be more focused on key areas. Management team meetings focus specifically on performance information fortnightly as well as undertaking quarterly reviews. Core brief has been developed to maintain staff focus. The council has also reviewed the size of the planning committee and increased delegation powers to improve its focus on planning issues requiring councillor input and decision.
- 45 Mechanisms to sustain councillor focus are developing. Committee agendas are generally clear with risk assessments detailed to aid councillors. Performance information to councillors is improving with the introduction of exception reporting and the use of the traffic light system to easily identify problem areas. These are recent changes and it is too early to see if they are helping the council sustain focus over time.

How has the council set about delivering its priorities?

Capacity

- 46 Strengths outweigh weaknesses.
- 47 The council is building capacity to deliver its priorities. Officers are clear about their roles. Staff are enthusiastic and committed to their work and the delivering of priorities. Recent appointments made in key areas, over the last two years, particularly at head of service level are positively impacting on improvements to service delivery. Additional capacity has been recruited in some areas such as the appointment of a community safety co-ordinator and a youth development worker. Consultants are used to increase capacity; to enhance resources at a particular time such as in legal services; and where in-house expertise is present but additional capacity is required for short periods such as delivering LSVT. This capacity is assisting the council to move forward at a reasonable pace.
- 48 Internal capacity is being maximised through effective human resource (HR) practice. An HR strategy is supported by a sickness and absence policy and flexible working policy. These address limitations on staffing resources. For example sickness absence is being managed through the use of occupational health support, return to work interviews, management of individual long term sickness cases and through direct HR involvement in sections where a sickness pattern is emerging. Training and development is identified through the personal review process. There is a well received induction programme for staff which the chief executive attends and includes details of the council's priorities. Relations with trade unions are good. This has resulted in the majority of long term sickness cases in 2003/04 being resolved with only two cases out of 10 ongoing into 2004/05 and a slight improvement to sickness levels over the previous year from 9.5 days to 9.3 days in 2003/04 (qualified PI).
- 49 The council is in a strong financial position. It has been debt free since 1995/96 and has significant financial reserves of £6.93 million. The council has a significant capital programme planned over the next five years. Further financial capacity will be available once the transfer of the housing stock is completed. A medium term financial strategy has been adopted. There are sound financial management systems in place, with an auditor scored judgement of three. The external auditor also considers the ethical framework and governance arrangements to be better than adequate. The council has also established a standards committee with independent membership.
- 50 Partnerships are used effectively to deliver services. Such partnership working has helped the council be in the top six of district councils for recycling. The council works effectively with partners on crime and disorder, for example providing a range of diversionary activities for young people. The Suffolk best value legal partnership provides additional capacity to the districts and county when required. The council is also working effectively at a local level with partners to meet specific local needs. This includes working with statutory and voluntary agencies to provide the Mildenhall counselling centre and working with the Mildenhall community partnership on the new bus station. This partnership working is delivering improvements for local people.

- 51 Alternative methods of service delivery are being explored and beginning to be used. The revenues and benefits service is being delivered with Breckland District Council as the Anglia revenues and benefits partnership. The two councils' revenues and benefits services are now a single service with one management team and joint staff appointments. The service is administered from a single site within the Breckland district and with one IT system. As a result savings have been achieved for both councils and the service is aiming for top quartile performance.
- 52 A robust approach to procurement is developing. The procurement strategy clearly defines the roles and responsibilities in the procurement process and the procurement route to be followed in any given situation. Authority is delegated to officers except in specifically defined situations. The action plan lacks clear targets for delivery but performance against the plan is reported on a quarterly basis to the performance management working group. The impact on capacity is not clear.
- 53 Council meetings are conducted in a business-like manner. Relationships between councillors and staff are good, as are relationships between councillors. Previously there had been a culture of bullying as identified by the IDeA review in June 2003. The change is enabling the council to move forward as evidenced by the setting of priorities for the first time.
- 54 The capacity of councillors is being developed. The large intake of new councillors in May 2003 was used as a catalyst for development. 11 training sessions have been completed and following a review of individual councillors' training needs further training is planned. There is also support for councillors, for example increased officer support for the overview and scrutiny committee. As a result councillors are becoming more involved at a strategic level in council business rather than in day to day management.
- 55 Councillors are not always clear about their roles and responsibilities. For example there is ambiguity over where responsibility lies for bringing about performance improvement: with overview and scrutiny or with the performance management working group? Also members of the planning committee do not fully understand their role concerning administration of section 106 agreements leading to argument about procedure rather than focusing on the matter for decision. This is impacting on the quality of decision making and the drive for service improvement.
- 56 Financial capacity to deliver future priorities is uncertain. Whilst the current financial position is strong there is concern over the future revenue budget. The medium term financial strategy projects that the current budget, taking into account cost pressures, identified current efficiencies and potential new income, cannot be sustained within current expectations of council tax increases.

Performance management

- 57 Weaknesses outweigh strengths.
- 58 The council has a corporate performance management framework but currently lacks an embedded performance management culture. Performance information is not used consistently to drive improvement. Performance issues are

considered by management team fortnightly with a quarterly review of all performance information. However performance information has not been used consistently and in a sustained manner to drive improvement. Consequently two thirds of targets within the best value performance plan for 2003/04 were not met.

- 59 Council performance is not effectively challenged by councillors. Overview and scrutiny committee does not undertake a hands-on performance management role. A performance management working group has been set up to undertake this role. It is difficult to identify how this is currently driving performance improvement overall, although it has led to some action to improve performance, for example: on removal of abandoned cars and staff sickness levels. Overview and scrutiny committee receives quarterly performance monitoring reports but acts as an overview body for the working group and only scrutinises areas of concern from it. Although the working group asks questions about performance, a culture of challenging and investigating under-performance is still emerging. Overall the role of councillors, particularly in overview and scrutiny committee, in driving improvement is underdeveloped.
- 60 Performance monitoring does not focus on priorities. Councillors attending the performance management working group receive quarterly reports of exception reporting plus progress against a range of indicators including national PIs, local PIs, and performance against issues identified as areas for improvement in the best value performance plan. A basket of key PIs has not been identified to help focus on delivery against priorities, although this is being worked on. It is difficult from the information presented for councillors to identify how the council is performing against its priorities.
- 61 Corporate and service plans do not all include targets. This makes it difficult for all achievements to be monitored and for targets to drive improvement. For example the economic development action plan does not include measurable targets.
- 62 Risk management is weak. A risk management strategy is in place. It describes responsibilities by role but does not provide a mechanism for regular assessment and reporting. Training has been provided for managers. Risk assessments are also included in committee reports, although this is not universal and it is not clear how robust these assessments are. Risk management is still to be fully embedded. The auditor scored judgement confirms that there are some weaknesses to be addressed. The council is potentially putting itself at risk particularly when entering new arenas.
- 63 Monitoring of service standards is not consistent. The council has produced service standards for a number of key services, such as development control, housing repairs and the environmental service food team. Currently there is limited publicity for these and mechanisms to monitor performance are not in place. There is not a history of setting service standards in consultation with customers or of clearly communicating these standards to customers and managing responses to them.
- 64 The council is not making its resources work in the best way to deliver value for money. It has identified that its trade waste collection service is costing it money and has responded by increasing prices in line with market levels. The impact of this on the number of customers using the service has not been assessed. The budgets for disabled facilities grants have either been substantially underspent or

over spent over the last four years. As a result local residents are not benefiting effectively from the service and the council's expenditure in this area is not under control.

- 65 Staff are clear about how their work contributes to the corporate objectives. A personal review process is in place and 98 per cent of staff underwent the process during 2003/04. These are completed annually with a half yearly review. The flightpath programme of briefings has also ensured staff understand their role.
- 66 Complaint trends are monitored and reported. The corporate complaints procedure is publicised and complaints are routinely resolved and reported to managers and councillors. It is not apparent that this information is systematically used to identify weaknesses and opportunities for service improvement.

What has the council achieved / not achieved to date?

Achievement in quality of service

- 67 Weaknesses outweigh strengths.
- 68 Published performance indicators show a low overall level of service performance when compared to other councils. In 2003/04 26 per cent of key PIs were in the bottom quartile, with 56 per cent below average and only 20 per cent in top quartile. For example in housing benefits all but one indicators are in the third or bottom quartiles. However of the 14 satisfaction indicators measured 11 are above average with 6 in the best quartile. The percentage of citizens satisfied with the overall service provided by the council is 61 per cent which is in the second quartile when compared to all councils.
- 69 The Audit Commission inspection of cleansing and refuse services published in August 2003 assessed the services as 'good'. Performance in benefit administration has been assessed as providing a 'fair' performance by the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate.
- 70 The council only agreed its current priorities in June 2004. It's achievements in quality of service are considered under the four objectives which were agreed at an earlier date.

Sustainable economic well being

- 71 The council manages a range of mixed quality industrial units. The council receive £600,000 of income per annum. Many of the industrial estates within the three main towns are old and were built for industries no longer in place. Vacancies are currently at 11-12 per cent of lettable stock. There are plans for industrial estate renewal focusing on the unlettable stock. But the best value review of industrial units has slipped and it is not clear how this renewal will be funded or achieved. As the condition of units deteriorates the council will not achieve its current income rate and will not help to diversify the local economy.
- 72 The council is working in partnership to improve its town centres. Using market towns initiative funding a healthcheck has been carried out in all three towns. Progress is most advanced in Brandon where the council is represented on the community partnership and a delivery plan has been produced to secure regeneration of the town. A dedicated 'drop in' facility for young people, the flowerpot, managed in partnership with the county council and the community partnership is now offering youth facilities, out of school club and a community resource centre.

Environmental well being

- 73 The council has a poor track record of delivering affordable housing to meet identified housing need. The housing needs survey 2000 identified a shortfall of 482 homes up to 2006. In 5 years between April 1999 and March 2004 only 108 new affordable homes were delivered. In the last 2 years the council had limited plans to achieve only 25 new homes. The council's delivery is also characterised by significant slippage in particular the housing corporation funded 97 homes for

delivery in 2002/03 in Newmarket however completion is not expected until 2005/06. As a result local housing need is not being adequately met.

- 74 Government targets for energy efficiency are not being achieved. The council achieved an 8.69 per cent improvement in energy efficiency by March 2003. At this current rate of improvement it will not achieve the government target of a 30 per cent improvement by 2010.
- 75 The council keeps public places, parks and open spaces well maintained, clean and tidy and free from graffiti and litter. A recent survey of parish and town councils also found a high degree of satisfaction with these services.
- 76 The council provides good waste collection services. 98 per cent of the population are served by a kerbside collection of recyclables. In 2003/04, 33 per cent of household waste was recycled or composted, thus meeting the statutory recycling target of 33 per cent. In a recent survey of parish and town councils all respondents stated that refuse collection and recycling are well provided for in the area.
- 77 The council has effectively maintained its housing stock. The council has invested in its homes providing a good standard of affordable housing for local residents. Only 38 homes do not meet the decent homes standard out of a stock total of 2600 homes. This benefits both current and future tenants of social housing.
- 78 There are examples of effective partnership working to deliver affordable homes. The council has worked with the local horse racing industry and levered in funding towards the provision of some affordable housing over recent years for injured and retired jockeys. It has also worked with the USAF to provide homes for American military personnel on new build sites on a leased basis for their exclusive use.

Social well being

- 79 Some of the available leisure facilities are poor. A decision to fully investigate alternative methods for the provision of swimming facilities in Newmarket was made in 1993 by the council but to date no new facility has been delivered. Also the design of the Dome leisure centre in Mildenhall limits the range of activities within the centre.
- 80 Performance in respect of homelessness is mixed. The council has met government targets to eliminate the use of bed and breakfast accommodation for homeless families with children. It also makes very low use of bed and breakfast by providing hostel accommodation. However the length of stay in hostels for homeless families is high and in 2003/04 was in the worst quartile of performance.
- 81 The council provides a good range of activities for children. Holiday activities are based in and around leisure centres and include bowling, kite making and scuba diving. In a recent survey, most parish and town councils agreed that the council understands the needs of young people and works well with others to provide an appropriate range of activities.

- 82 A range of leisure facilities are provided across the district. Each of the three main towns has a leisure centre and Mildenhall and Newmarket have swimming pools. There are also numerous basketball areas, two skateparks and three BMX tracks. The council directly provides 33 equipped play areas for young people.
- 83 Effective partnership working is delivering services to improve health. Exercise on referral schemes are in place at the leisure centres with 2,600 referrals since the start of the scheme in 1996. The council works with stakeholders at a county level on supporting people and its work, along with all the district councils in Suffolk, has been awarded beacon status by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

Corporate excellence

- 84 Effective services for disabled residents are not being delivered. The council's budgets for disabled facilities grants (DFGs) have either been substantially under or over spent during the last four years. The council terminated a partnership contract for the delivery of DFGs in June 2003 as a result of poor performance and is now negotiating a new provision on a county wide basis due for implementation in October 2004. The service is currently delivered in house but the council has no performance data for the service, no published service standards and no agreed criteria for the prioritisation of referrals from occupational therapists. It has a substantial backlog of approved grants. Vulnerable local residents are not effectively receiving the support required to sustain independent living.

Achievement of improvement

- 85 Strengths outweigh weaknesses.
- 86 There is a mixed picture of improvement in performance indicators. However overall the council has achieved significant improvements in some priority areas. According to audited figures for 2003/04 performance in 26 key indicators improved over 2002/03 but this improvement is not reflected in improved quartile performance. Without including satisfaction data 59 per cent of performance indicators have improved but 41 per cent have not improved. Improvements include the percentage of household waste recycled or composted which is now in top quartile and percentage of planning applications determined. Satisfaction indicators show a slight overall decline in common with a number of councils. In 2003/04 two thirds of targets in the best value performance plan were not met.
- 87 External assessors report positive prospects for service improvement. The Audit Commission inspection of the council's cleansing and refuse services has indicated 'promising' prospects for improvement. The BFI has awarded the benefits service a "fair towards good" rating for improvement.
- 88 Achievements in quality of service are considered under the four objectives as in the above section.

Sustainable economic well being

- 89 The council is improving its town centres. In Brandon a heritage economic regeneration scheme which targets high street commercial premises has

triggered £600,000 of building work. 10 buildings have been improved, 9 dwellings created, 3 long-term vacant shops have been put back into use and 28 full time and 6 part time jobs have been sustained or created. In Newmarket the council has restored and redeveloped Palace House as a visitor and tourist information centre which also offers meeting rooms for local groups and businesses. It has worked with the architect for a supermarket in a prominent position in Newmarket, to secure a modern landmark building which incorporates elements of local vernacular.

Environmental well being

- 90 Waste services are continuing to improve. The amount of waste collected per head of population was less than most other councils in 2002/03 and it fell further in 2003/04. Combined recycling and composting performance is continuing to improve. 28 per cent was achieved in 2002/03 and 33 per cent in 2003/04, top quartile performance. The council has set a target of 41 per cent for 2004/05 and provisional data indicates that this target has been exceeded in each of the first 5 months of the year. The council is well placed to deliver the 35 per cent PSA target for this year and the 40 per cent statutory performance standard set for 2005/06.
- 91 Clear benefits have been achieved through crime and disorder work with partners. Some crime levels are beginning to fall. After rising in 2002/03, published data indicates that during 2003/04 target crimes have reduced: burglary by 17 per cent, robbery by 5 per cent and vehicle crime by 9 per cent.
- 92 Effective measures to reduce crime are in place. Warren Close, Brandon was highlighted as a high crime area and following an estate audit a range of initiatives were completed. These include CCTV, repainting of car spaces, removal of walls and improved lighting. The result of this is a 50 per cent reduction in crime.
- 93 Performance in respect of private sector housing is poor and is not improving. Audited PIs show that performance for the percentage of private sector dwellings made fit or demolished as a result of council action is in the worst quartile in 2003/04. The council made no homes fit between 2000/01 and 2002/03 and during the same period the council brought no empty homes back into use. Audited 2003/04 BVPI data shows a very slight improvement although performance is still poor with only 0.2 per cent of unfit homes made fit or demolished, against a council target of 1 per cent. Three empty homes were brought back into use, against a council target of two homes. (This figure has been qualified).
- 94 The council has failed to meet any new supported housing needs in the last two years. The council has not taken advantage of the introduction of supporting people to enhance significantly its provision of either floating support and/or housing provision. As a result the council still has a number of groups who have been identified as in urgent need for whom no provision has been made. These include young and older people, single homeless people and those with learning, mental and physical disabilities. A more pro-active approach to affordable housing could have resulted in some of these needs being met sooner.

Social well being

- 95 The council is securing investment to improve the quality of life for local people. The council has achieved lottery funding to enhance and designate three local nature reserves. These are being enhanced through the involvement of the local community as volunteer wardens. The Lakenheath reserve has recently been recognised by English Nature as an example of good practice in the development of local nature reserves.
- 96 In partnership the council is taking appropriate action to address the national priority for tackling substance misuse. Through the CDRP, and in partnership with a range of agencies, the Mildenhall Counselling Centre has provided help and advice to 110 individuals on a wide range of problems, including drug and alcohol misuse.
- 97 Performance overall relating to benefits is declining. Performance only improved in the average time to process benefits, with an improvement from 50 to 43 days between 2002/03 and 2003/04. For the same period performance in other areas declined: the percentage of renewal claims processed on time fell from 74 to 64 per cent, the percentage of cases processed correctly fell from 98 to 97 per cent, and the percentage of overpaid benefits recovered fell from 50 to 33 per cent (this figure has been qualified).
- 98 Impact of work to address rural isolation and disadvantage is not fully monitored or managed. The council has had some success in meeting the needs of the disadvantaged within the towns and some work is taking place to address rural need, but as there are few targets it is difficult to monitor the success of this work. The one Suffolk portal project is being used to make services available over the internet.

Corporate excellence

- 99 Performance on processing most planning applications has improved significantly. In 2003/04 58 per cent of major, 56 per cent of minor and 74 per cent of other applications were processed within specified time periods achieving the interim standards. This is a considerable improvement on 2002/03 results. Provisional data for the first 5 months of 2004/05 indicates that performance for minor and other applications has continued to improve standing at 83 per cent and 87 per cent respectively which exceeds the 2006/07 PSA target. However, performance on major applications has fallen to 53 per cent which is below 2003/04 performance and the service plan target.
- 100 The council has adopted a race equality scheme in March 2004 but this has not yet become embedded and is yet to form a key element of all service delivery. Staff have received training. But the council has not yet achieved level one of the Commission for Racial Equality's standard for local government. The council has only 0.18 per cent of employees from minority ethnic groups and only just over 1 per cent of staff declare they meet DDA definition of having a disability. The council is doing little to engage with hard to reach groups.

Investment

- 101 Strengths outweigh weaknesses.
- 102 There is clear evidence that the council has put into place a range of building blocks which address existing gaps. Investment has been made in improving corporate systems and processes, capacity and developing services to help achieve service improvement. The council is investing in some priorities. External funding is supporting improvements to recycling and to the market towns. The council is well placed to deliver improvements to revenues and benefits in the future and the health agenda through the delivery of Brandon healthy living centre. A more pro-active approach to investment in services is being taken following the setting of priorities.
- 103 The council is investing in the capacity of its staff. This includes appointment of a learning and development officer to give a greater emphasis to development. There is support for a number of staff to get management and professional qualifications. An officer development programme is being undertaken. The council is also further investing in capacity with £80,000 added to the base budget in 2004/05 to build capacity at a corporate level. This is currently being used to provide temporary capacity pending a management restructure. No decision on how this additional funding will be used has been made. The council has also reviewed the salaries of all senior managers through a review of other local councils and other bodies. Councillors agreed to increases to salaries from April 2004. This is expected to help with previous retention issues at that level. Overall this work is building the council's capacity to deliver service improvement.
- 104 Other building blocks are being put into place. These include investment in IT with local investment being made in the e-government programme. An additional £275,000 of revenue funding has been invested in 2003/04 and £111,000 in 2004/05 from capital receipts, above the central government grant, to enable the delivery of the e-government programme. Investment to improve performance management is being made through the purchase of an IT system which will assist in developing targets. Work is also being undertaken to review the large number of local PIs currently in place. This will help the council focus on PIs which measure key aspects of service.
- 105 Contract arrangements attached to the LSVT offer opportunity for further benefits. Commitments include a redecoration and gardening scheme, hassle free moves, refurbishment of 76 non self contained bed sits, security improvements, greater tenant involvement, and a super caretaker service. These promises will help the council ensure that tenants receive a good service and the quality and supply of social housing is maintained through secured investment.
- 106 The council is securing a range of external funding to develop and improve services. This includes £1.5 million from DEFRA to support recycling, £850,000 from Suffolk Accessible Government Partnership for the Suffolk portal project and £45,000 for Brandon from market towns initiative to regenerate the town. Smaller amounts of funding have also been secured to provide specific services, including £5,450 to fund equipment for a digital cinema network and sponsorship of £750 to fund a programme of arts events in Brandon. Partnership working is also leveraging in substantial additional funding, for example £21 million from ODPM towards supporting people across the county. This range of inward investment is improving services for local people, for example increasing the

percentage of population who receive a kerbside collection of recyclables from 82 per cent in 2002/03 to 98 per cent in 2003/04.

- 107 Investment in affordable homes will be secured due to sale of assets, identified in the urban capacity study. The urban capacity study, completed in October 2003, supports the development of the council's local development framework and identifies the potential for new housing development within the district up to 2016. This will help to develop policies which assist the delivery of all types of new homes and determine the appropriateness of new development as it is submitted for planning permission. The LSVT has yielded £16.4 million and 55 per cent, £9.07 million, is earmarked for new homes. 450 affordable homes will be delivered
- 108 The council is open and responsive to external challenge. In the last two years the council has undertaken a peer review and follow-up and a peer challenge. The follow-up review in December 2003 highlighted that the council had responded quickly to the recommendations from June 2003 and had set about addressing a number of areas identified for improvement. These include making progress on priority setting, developing councillors and tackling inappropriate behaviour. This work fed into the improvement plan which the council is now working through.
- 109 Internal challenge is more limited. The council undertook a whole authority review using the EFQM excellence model in 2002. This identified required process improvements and these have been fed into an improvement plan along with the results of the external challenges. However, ongoing challenge within the council is immature. Best value is not delivering continuous improvement. Key best value reviews such as access to services have been delayed. Until recently progress on action plans from such reviews was not reported to councillors. There has been significant slippage against many of the actions in the waste and recycling action plan. However some change has followed the revenues and benefits and planning reviews.
- 110 Many of the building blocks have only recently been put into place and are still developing. For example the medium term financial strategy is at an early stage and does not yet guide investment decisions. Although investment has been made to overview and scrutiny with officer support, development of a work plan and a budget, this is yet to deliver robust challenge to the decision making process. A review of procurement started in December 2003 and has led to the production of a procurement strategy but further work to embed this is required. Similarly a risk management strategy is in place but further work is required to embed it.
- 111 The council has not invested effectively in private sector housing renewal. The council has little up to date information about private sector stock condition. Its last survey is out of date and had a poor level of information, for instance it failed to identify any houses in multiple occupation. As a result the council does not have sufficient information on which to base a renewal strategy.

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

Learning

- 112 Strengths outweigh weaknesses.
- 113 The council's level of self-awareness has increased. This has been demonstrated through the response to its EFQM assessment, peer review and challenge and the instigation of the improvement programme. Following the earlier peer review with IDeA the council has recognised weaknesses identified and is addressing them including developing councillor capacity. In the self assessment the council is honest about some weaknesses in service delivery. This increased self-awareness should help the council to address weaknesses.
- 114 There are some good internal mechanisms in place to share learning. The staff development group, set up as a result of investors in people leads on some communication activities and acts as a consultative body. The flightpath sessions are used for presentation and discussion of priorities and the improvement plan. Core brief and team meetings are used to share information and activity across services.
- 115 There has been some learning from other local authorities. Within Suffolk, for example in relation to the e-government programme, from Tamworth Borough Council with regard to customer relationship management and from similar nearby district councils regarding staff retention issues and the application of market supplements. There are also a number of cross-authority groups in place within Suffolk including a group to prepare for the changes of the new licensing bill. The council is currently working with St Edmundsbury Borough Council on sharing information on its learning and development officer's role and the two authorities are looking to use these two posts together to achieve maximum effect.
- 116 The council does not systematically seek out learning from high performing local authorities. Although some local authorities have visited Forest Heath to look at their recycling service. It does not use benchmarking to identify potential improvements to services and processes. This will impact on the council's ability to drive forward service improvement.
- 117 Learning is not consistently shared across the council. There are no formal mechanisms for sharing learning arising from projects across the council and learning from the use of consultants is patchy. However the council has invested in recent training in the use of a formal project management methodology.

Future plans

- 118 Weaknesses outweigh strengths.
- 119 The council does not yet have well developed plans to deliver ambitions for the district. Its priorities were only established in June 2004 and do not yet link to service plans, making it difficult to see how they will be delivered. The council

does not yet have a robust means of ensuring that it will deliver the improvements that matter most to local people.

- 120 A number of key plans for the future are not in place. The council does not have a comprehensive range of strategies for meeting local housing need. For instance it has a homelessness and private sector strategy but has not updated its Home Energy Conservation Act strategy since 1995. A draft strategy is scheduled for completion by October 2004. The council's planning policy framework is out of date. The local development framework is planned for adoption in early 2007. However, in the meantime the council does not have a clear overall, up to date local planning policy framework to inform stakeholders about what it is trying to achieve and assist decision making.
- 121 There is an absence of plans to address previous non-delivery. One of the exceptions is the work programme to deliver an upper quartile revenues and benefits service through the Anglia revenues and benefits partnership. However there are no robust plans to deal with PIs in the bottom quartile, which reduces the likelihood of achieving the necessary service improvement.
- 122 Many of the council's future plans lack clear measurable targets and outcomes. For example, the economic development strategy action plan includes a number of projects but no outcomes. Service plans do not consistently link to the existing priorities of the council. This makes it difficult to see how the council will achieve its ambition and what this will look like to local people.
- 123 The council has been slow to develop some future plans. The race equality scheme was approved in March 2004, the communications strategy in May 2004 and the procurement strategy in June 2004. These are key plans and it is not clear what difference they will make to the organisation as they have not yet had time to be fully communicated and embedded.
- 124 Workforce planning is at an early stage. Developing a workforce plan is one of the actions within the HR strategy but the focus is on recruitment and retention rather than linking future plans to an assessment of what capacity will be required. The council has not carried out a detailed assessment of its capacity to deliver future plans. For example the decision to set up a strategic housing function was delayed and the new team has not been recruited sufficiently in advance of transfer to achieve a smooth transition. Although two temporary consultants will act as a bridge the council's capacity to meet its new priority to deliver an expanded programme of affordable housing is limited. This resource is no greater than has been available to date during a period of poor delivery. Plans to deliver priorities may be affected by this lack of capacity planning.
- 125 There has been limited involvement of stakeholders in the development of future plans. In relation to housing provision it has no forums for developers, housing advice, homelessness, housing associations, and private landlords. Although there are some proposals for these to be set up the council is currently missing an opportunity to maximise its resources in policy development and service delivery.
- 126 Some plans are in place to support council priorities. The council has an up to date housing strategy and a joint municipal waste strategy. In partnership with the waste disposal authority and other Suffolk waste collection authorities it has produced a joint strategy for the management of waste up to 2020. This includes

the statutory recycling plan for Forest Heath which has challenging targets for exceeding the statutory performance standards set for the council by government.

- 127 Further plans are developing to meet priorities. Planning for the regeneration of the town centres at Newmarket, Brandon and Mildenhall has been translated into one of the council's key priorities, vibrant town centres. Community partnerships have been set up in the three main towns and these are identifying improvements required for their towns. In Newmarket the home of horse racing project has concluded its feasibility phase and Eastern England Development Agency are funding a project manager to take the project forward. Work on plans for Mildenhall are less developed, with the only firm plan the development of the bus station which is being finalised. Once in place with clear milestones and targets these plans should lead to improvements in quality of life for residents.
- 128 Most statutory plans and strategies are in place and those that are subject to external assessment are of good quality. For example, the asset management plan and the capital strategy were rated as 'good' by Government Office for the East and the housing strategy and business plan as 'fit for purpose'.

Summary of theme scores and strengths / weaknesses

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Ambition	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long term ambition • Objectives agreed through consultation and stakeholders • Objectives reflect local issues • Staff understand and are committed to ambition • Commitment to community leadership role 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Objectives lack measurable outcomes • Weak community engagement • Strategic management not yet fully effective
Prioritisation	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four clear broad priorities • Developed priorities through consultation • Effective internal communication • External communication improving 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of clarity of non-priorities • Resources not shifted to priorities • Lack of measurable outcomes
Focus	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recent focus on key areas such as LSVT, waste, revenues & benefits • Focus on performance information by management team • Councillor focus developing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slippage on major initiatives • Political structure doesn't aid focus • Action planning & delivery of decisions not clear & consistent • Loss of focus on some services
Capacity	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Officer capacity • Effective HR practices • Strong current financial position • Effective use of partnerships • Alternative methods of service delivery developing – revenues & benefits • Developing councillor capacity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of clarity of councillors roles and responsibilities • Future revenue budget concerns
Performance management	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corporate performance management system in place • Staff personal reviews embedded • Complaint trends monitored and reported 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance management culture not embedded • Lack of effective challenge by councillors • Performance monitoring not focused on priorities • Lack of targets in plans • Risk management weak • Value for money not consistently demonstrated

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Achievement in quality of service	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Good' cleansing & refuse service in AC inspection • Good waste collection services • 'Flowerpot' drop-in facility • Measures to reduce crime in Mildenhall • Well maintained and clean open space • Range of leisure facilities • High level of decent homes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 56 per cent of PIs below average • Weak performance on housing benefits • Some poor leisure facilities • Poor track record of delivering affordable housing • High length of stay in hostels for homeless families • Not achieving energy efficiency targets • Disabled residents not receiving effective services
Achievement of improvement	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Promising' prospects for cleaning & refuse inspection • Heritage economic regeneration scheme in Brandon • Falling crime levels • Improving waste services • Improving development control performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benefits performance declining • Poor performance in private sector housing PIs • Supported housing needs not being met
Investment	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving capacity through training, reviewing salaries and additional budget • Open to external challenge • External funding to deliver improved services • Effective use of assets – delivery of affordable homes • LSVT will ensure decent homes standards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal challenge limited • Number of building blocks not fully embedded • Ineffective investment in private sector housing renewal
Learning	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing level of self-awareness • Good internal methods for sharing learning • Learning from other local authorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Failure to systematically seek out learning from other local authorities • Learning not consistently shared
Future plans	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asset management & capital strategy assessed as good • Housing strategy assessed as 'fit for purpose' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plans do not currently enable the achievement of ambition • Lack of measurable outcomes and targets • Limited stakeholder engagement

Scoring key:

- 1 - Weak
- 2 - Weaknesses outweigh strengths
- 3 - Strengths outweigh weaknesses
- 4 - Strong

Appendix 1 - Balancing housing markets (BHM) diagnostic assessment

How well does the council understand its housing market and from its understanding has the council developed the right proposals to help balance its housing markets?

- 129 High risk of service failure and/or poor outcomes in this area.
- 130 There is no up to date comprehensive overview of the district housing market. The council's most recent housing needs survey was carried out in 2000 and was jointly commissioned and funded with four other Suffolk district councils. The survey has not been updated in the intervening period with information on local house prices, census information or the housing register to maintain a current picture of housing needs. Additional surveys have not been carried out, such as a detailed stock supply/demand analysis at a local sub area level. This information would have supported the council's efforts to negotiate with developers.
- 131 The council has an incomplete understanding of housing needs within the district. It has worked with its Cambridge sub region partners to carry out a regional housing needs survey in 2003 and conducted research into regional key workers housing needs. The council has with the county council and district partners conducted research on the needs of local key workers and identified the needs of vulnerable groups in the community to form a county-wide programme of supported housing priorities. However it lacks information about rural housing needs and the black and ethnic minority community.
- 132 The council has not kept up to date with good practice and national priorities to improve access to social housing. Its allocations policy was last reviewed in 1996. It has not embraced modern approaches to access for social housing such as common housing registers and choice based lettings. The council also does not undertake ethnic monitoring and does not comply with the Commission for Racial Equality code of practice for rented housing. As a result it could unknowingly be discriminating unfairly against some applicants. In addition because the register has a 12 month residency qualification it does not fully reflect local housing needs.
- 133 Up to date information about the condition of private sector housing is not available. The last survey was carried out in 1999 however it failed to identify any houses in multiple occupation (HMOs). A further survey focused on identifying potential HMOs was commissioned in 2002. This survey identified a possible 100 HMOs. However the council has not visited all of these yet to identify and confirm which are HMOs. Without accurate information the council cannot address unfitness in private sector housing effectively.
- 134 Consultation and involvement of stakeholders is inconsistently undertaken. The council's supporting people work at a county level has been awarded beacon status by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM). However it has failed to effectively engage with private developers, private landlords, registered social landlords (RSLs) and voluntary agencies involved in housing advice, homelessness and parish councils. For instance it has not provided forums for ongoing policy and operational development. Such engagement would increase capacity to meet housing needs more effectively.

- 135 The council has failed to address affordable housing provision through its planning powers. The most recent local plan lapsed in 2001 and did not contain robust requirements for the delivery of affordable housing. The council has not adopted any supplementary planning guidance to achieve affordable homes although it does have a local planning policy that seeks to achieve 25 per cent affordable housing on sites of 25 or more dwellings. The adoption of more robust planning guidance is under consideration with a view to inclusion in a new local development framework in 2007. In the meantime opportunities to achieve affordable housing will continue to be missed.
- 136 The council has an up to date housing strategy for 2004/07. A cross cutting officer group and a range of stakeholders including councillors, RSLs and voluntary agencies developed the strategy. The Government Office of the East considered the overall housing strategy "fit for purpose". However the strategy is not based on up to date housing needs and stock condition information. The lack of this data impacts adversely on the council's ability to devise an effective long term strategy to meet housing needs.
- 137 The council is ensuring that the supply of existing affordable housing in their ownership is maintained and improved. In the last two years the council has conducted an options appraisal, significant tenant consultation to select a preferred RSL partner and a ballot on large-scale voluntary transfer (LSVT). The majority of tenants, 58 per cent of those voting approved the transfer in December 2003. This promises to achieve a number of improvements including stock modernisation, maintaining the decent homes standard, environmental improvements and conversion of sheltered bed sits to self contained one bedroom flats for older people.
- 138 The council is obtaining the information it needs to develop effective housing and planning strategies to achieve affordable housing. In 2003 it carried out an urban capacity study. This identified the potential for future housing delivery and made recommendations that would assist the council developing its local planning policies. In particular the study highlighted the contribution the council could make to affordable housing through the use of its own land bank which has now been addressed through sale to its strategic RSL partner to build affordable homes.
- 139 The focus within the council on the provision of affordable housing is increasing. The council's housing function has largely been focused on its role as a landlord. With the decision to pursue a LSVT the council's approach to its strategic housing role after stock transfer has begun to emerge although it still has a long way to go. The low level of affordable housing delivery has been recognised and the council has made a significant contribution to achieving more affordable homes through the sale of its land bank. In June 2004 the council also adopted the provision of affordable housing as one of its four strategic priorities and this also reflects the priorities of the community strategy.

What are the council's actions and what outcomes has it achieved in helping to balance housing markets?

- 140 Very high risk of service or function failure and/or poor outcomes.
- 141 The council has a poor track record of delivering affordable housing to meet identified housing need. The housing needs survey 2000 identified a shortfall of

482 homes up to 2006. Between April 1999 and March 2004 only 108 new affordable homes were built. Forest Heath was the poorest performing authority for the provision of affordable housing in 2003 with only three affordable homes produced. The best district authority achieved 62 affordable homes. The council's delivery is also characterised by significant slippage, the housing corporation funded 97 homes for delivery in 2002/03 in Newmarket however completion is not expected until 2005/06. As a result local housing need is not being adequately met.

- 142 Structure plan targets for new homes are not being delivered. Completion rates up to March 2003 averaged 156 homes per annum compared to a requirement of 260 homes. As a result the council's annual delivery rate up to 2016 has increased to 311 homes per annum a 20 per cent increase. In comparison to other Suffolk authorities this is the worst performance against structure plan targets. In 2003 the council achieved a total of 62 homes the next worst district achieved 292 and the best achieved 568. This poor level of housing supply will continue to impact adversely on homelessness and affordability.
- 143 The council has failed to deliver major housing schemes. The council's 1995 local plan identifies the provision of 1500 new homes at Red Lodge. Its plan was to deliver 850 homes by 2001. To date the council has not delivered any new homes on this site. Although three show homes are nearing completion and agreement has been reached for the first phase of homes the council until very recently failed to engage with developers and promote the development of this site over the last 15 years. This has impacted adversely on both the supply of affordable housing and new housing in the district to meet both local, county wide and regional needs.
- 144 The council has failed to meet any new supported housing needs in the last two years. Schemes the council has provided include two frail elderly schemes, schemes for people with physical and mental disabilities and a shared house for homeless single people. The council did not make use of the introduction of supporting people to enhance significantly its provision of either floating support and/or housing provision. As a result the council still has a number of groups who have been identified as in urgent need for whom no provision has been made. These include, young and older people, single homeless people and those with learning, mental and physical disabilities. A more pro-active approach to affordable housing could have resulted in some of these needs being met sooner.
- 145 Private sector housing has largely been ignored by the council. Its emphasis has been on not spending any money on it. It provides no discretionary grants to encourage improvement, does not engage with private landlords to encourage bringing accommodation into use by households in affordable housing needs and has no rent deposit scheme or private sector leasing scheme. It has undertaken a low level of enforcement action to improve housing conditions even failing to inspect potential HMOs despite investing resources to identify them. The worst housing conditions are usually found in HMOs where residents are exposed to greater health and safety risks that the council is failing to address. It has not taken advantage of the Regulatory Reform Order 2002 to establish a pro-active renewal service.
- 146 Performance in respect of private sector housing has been poor. Audited PIs show that performance for the percentage of private sector dwellings made fit or

demolished as a result of council action is in the worst quartile in 2003/04 as is the council's performance for bringing empty homes back into use. The council made no homes fit between 2000/01 and 2002/03 and during the same period the council brought no empty homes back into use. 2003/04 PI data shows a very slight improvement although performance is still poor at only 0.2 per cent.

- 147 Performance in respect of homelessness is mixed. It has met government targets to eliminate the use of bed and breakfast accommodation for homeless families with children. It also makes very low use of bed and breakfast accommodation by providing hostel accommodation. However the length of stay in hostels for homeless families is high and in 2003/04 was in the worst quartile of performance. During 2003/04 the council's performance deteriorated from 19.42 weeks in 2002/03 to 22.8 weeks. In 2003/04 21 weeks and above constituted the worst performance for councils. The council's performance in respect of decision making times is also not good with less than 90 per cent of decisions being made within 33 days during the last 4 years.
- 148 Government targets for energy efficiency are not being achieved. The council achieved an 8.69 per cent improvement in energy efficiency by March 2003. At this current rate of improvement it will not achieve the government target of a 30 per cent improvement by 2010. The council has no up to date strategy for achieving energy efficiency and nor does it have a fuel poverty strategy. The average SAP rating in Forest Heath is 61 in line with the average for England however a third of homes fall below this standard. Local residents are not benefiting from lower fuel bills and future improvements are unclear.
- 149 Effective services for disabled residents are not being delivered. The council's budgets for DFGs have either been substantially under or over spent during the last four years. The council terminated a partnership contract for the delivery of DFGs in June 2003 as a result of poor performance and is now negotiating a new provision, on a county wide basis, due for implementation in October 2004. The service is currently delivered in house but the council has no performance data for the service, no published service standards and no agreed criteria for the prioritisation of referrals from occupational therapists. It has a substantial backlog of approved grants. In 2002/03 and 2003/04 total grant approvals stood at £539,000 against budgeted provision of £247,000 and actual and estimated completion of work was valued at £381,000. Vulnerable local residents are not receiving the support required to sustain independent living.
- 150 The council's delivery of affordable homes is beginning to improve. This year the council expects to deliver about 100 affordable homes. Some of these have been achieved through section 106 agreements and some are homes being delivered through housing corporation funding that has slipped from previous years. These homes will assist the council to meet local housing need.
- 151 The council's performance for the level of development on brownfield sites has decreased. However this has to be set in the context of low levels of housing delivery overall. The percentage of homes built on previously developed land has fallen from 73 per cent in 2002/03 to 67 per cent in 200/04. This is below the average for district councils of 76 per cent but above the government target of 60 per cent. The use of brownfield sites helps the council protect the quality of the local environment.

- 152 The council has effectively maintained its housing stock. It has invested in its homes providing a good standard of affordable housing for local residents. Only 38 homes do not meet the decent homes standard out of a stock total of approximately 2600 homes. This benefits both current and future tenants of social housing in the district.
- 153 The council has developed some effective partnerships with key local stakeholders. They have worked with the horse racing industry and levered in funding towards the provision of some affordable housing for injured and retired jockeys. It has also worked with the USAF to provide homes for American military personnel on new build sites. One site of 100 homes has been completed in Mildenhall and a further 150 homes are planned. These developments are provided on a leased basis for the exclusive use of USAF personnel. However on termination of the lease the council has the ability to determine their future use through its planning powers. This assists both the future supply of housing and reduces some of the pressure on private rented accommodation.

How well does the council monitor its progress and impact in helping to balance housing markets and how effectively does this feed into future strategies and plans?

- 154 High risk of service or function failure and/or poor outcomes.
- 155 The council's plans for affordable housing are not well developed. There are no detailed plans that outline the tenure type, household mix and supported housing needs it is seeking to achieve on each site it has identified for housing or a programme of delivery. While the possibility of housing corporation funding looks favourable none has yet been secured for the former council land.
- 156 The use of the council's planning powers are weak. The council has no plans for introducing supplementary planning guidance. The council does not have a "plan, monitor and manage" approach to housing provision that regularly review its performance against structure plan targets. It has not actively promoted the development of more housing with private sector developers and has no clear plans to do this. Pending a delayed new local development framework in 2007 the councils planning powers will have a limited impact on housing delivery.
- 157 Performance is not continuously and comprehensively monitored. The council does not update stock condition and housing needs data in between surveys and has limited performance data about the provision of DFGs, nominations performance, customer satisfaction levels and housing advice. Progress against strategies is not regularly reported to councillors for review and action. The council is also not striving to be a top performer, it is not aiming for top quartile performance for homes made fit or demolished or for the average length of stay for homeless households in hostel accommodation. Without challenging targets the service is unlikely to achieve a step change for the benefit of local residents.
- 158 The council has not clearly established whether it has the capacity to deliver its strategic housing function. It has carried out some work to establish the scope of its function and the size of the team needed including surveys of neighbouring authorities and advice from consultants. However a planned best value review of housing needs has not been undertaken and no robust capacity assessment has been made to assess the resources required to achieve the councils increased ambition. It has not effectively planned the creation of a new strategic housing

team despite all the council's housing staff transferring to the new LSVT. The recruitment of the new team has not been timed to take place prior to stock transfer. Although consultants will bridge some of the gap the opportunity to ensure that the team is in place with an organised handover will be missed.

- 159 The council is not fully exploiting the potential of partners to increase its capacity. For instance RSLs have not been consulted or involved in the development and formulation of new nomination and housing register arrangements post stock transfer nor are they clear about the role the council envisages RSLs will take in future development. Other partners such as the Citizens Advice Bureau have been funded to provide housing advice but the council has no service level agreement and no information about the level and type of advice being provided.
- 160 There is no systematic approach to learning. There are examples of learning from the use of consultants and visits to other councils but also examples of recommendations from consultants that have not been followed through such as the 2000 housing needs survey. The council does not make use of benchmarking or seek to learn from the best performing councils in housing.
- 161 Capacity to deliver its strategic housing function has been increased. The council has formed a cross departmental working group of officers from planning, environmental health and housing. This meets six weekly and includes councillor representation from the chair of overview and scrutiny committee. The group is chaired by the strategic director (services) and it has successfully achieved a new housing strategy and is now tasked with its implementation. This approach will assist the council to focus on the delivery of its strategic housing function.
- 162 A strategic approach to improving the future provision of affordable housing in the district has been adopted. The council is creating a dedicated LSVT serving the district that will be financially and organisationally supported in a group structure by a larger established RSL parent. The transfer is due to take place by mid October 2004. This will make modernisation and service improvements more sustainable for residents.
- 163 Building blocks to enable increased delivery of affordable housing are being put in place. These include the sale of council land to its strategic housing partner that enjoys housing corporation approved development partner status. The council expects to deliver 450 affordable homes on the land during the next 3 to 7 years. The council has gained a substantial capital receipt from the land sale and will gain a further receipt from the imminent stock transfer. These receipts total approximately £34 million. A substantial proportion of these receipts are to be used to deliver affordable housing and support the council's wider strategic housing function. The council has not yet decided how all the receipt will be used and whether any of it will be diverted to other non housing priorities.
- 164 The council's 2004/07 housing strategy is a positive plan. It seeks to address a wide range of challenges including a substantial acceleration in the provision of affordable housing, the decent homes standard across all tenures, developing a new home improvement agency with partners and addressing both expressed and unidentified needs. However the council's future plans are not comprehensive as it lacks a robust set of sub strategies for private sector renewal, energy efficiency, empty homes and supported housing and long term SMART targets. Without these plans it is unclear how the council intends to address local housing needs.

Summary of balancing housing markets diagnostic judgements and strengths / weaknesses

Area of focus	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
How well does the council understand its housing market and from its understanding has the council developed the right proposals to help balance its housing markets?	C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cambridge sub region housing needs survey Supported housing needs identified Urban capacity study Affordable housing provision recently adopted as priority Effective tenant consultation and involvement in LSVT Beacon status for supporting people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No comprehensive picture of housing needs across the district No up to date private sector stock condition survey No SPG for affordable housing No ethnic monitoring and non compliance with CRE code of practice Out of date allocations policy
What are the council's actions and what outcomes has it achieved in helping to balance housing markets?	d	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The councils stock meets the decent homes standard The delivery of affordable homes is beginning to improve 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Failing to meet structure plan targets, poor delivery of affordable homes No recent supported housing schemes Poor performance in private sector renewal Low achievement of energy efficiency improvements Length of stay in hostel accommodation for homeless deteriorating
How well does the council monitor its progress and impact in helping to balance housing markets and how effectively does this feed into future strategies and plans?	C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creation of dedicated LSVT Substantial capital receipt for housing Sale of council land will deliver approximately 450 homes Cross departmental working on housing strategy working group Fit for purpose housing strategy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No plans for SPG and local development framework delayed No adequate plans in place to address structure plan targets Performance management is weak and not striving for top quartile performance Uncertain capacity to deliver the strategic housing function
Balancing housing markets diagnostic assessment judgement	C		

Scoring key

For each of the key areas looked at within the diagnostic assessments **the need for improvement**, based upon the risk of service failure and poor outcomes, is identified using the following scale.

a = very low

b = low

c = high

d = very high

Appendix 2 - Public space diagnostic assessment

How well does the council contribute to the management of the physical environment?

- 165 High risk of service failure and/or poor outcomes.
- 166 The council has been slow to integrate sustainability into operations and practices. A local agenda 21 strategy was published in 1999/00 and a draft sustainable development strategy in 2001. However, there are no targets to measure impact and no performance management arrangements. The community strategy 2003/07 provides an overarching framework for promoting and improving economic, social and environmental well-being. It lists broad objectives and identifies lead organisations, partners and performance measures. But there are no milestones or targets so progress and effectiveness will be difficult to gauge. The recently published corporate plan appropriately reflects sustainability aspirations with three of the four objectives covering economic, social and environmental well being. It describes a vision related to each of the objectives and indicates that progress will be managed against targets to be set out in service plans and the best value performance plan. However, at present the council has no mechanism to assess how effective it has been in embracing sustainability.
- 167 The council's planning policy framework is out of date. The adopted local plan was designed to cover the period up to 2001. Work on the replacement plan was delayed and then abandoned in June 2002 in favour of the emerging requirement for a local development scheme and framework. Progress is sustained through a joint officer/councillor working group and liaison with the regional government office. Public consultation is planned for early 2005 with adoption in early 2007. However, supplementary guidance is limited and in the meantime the council does not have a clear overall, up to date planning policy framework to inform stakeholders about what it is trying to achieve and assist decision making.
- 168 There has been insufficient focus on meeting responsibilities under the Disability Discrimination Act. Only four out of five public buildings will satisfy access requirements by the deadline of 1st October 2004. The remainder are generally subject to proposed redevelopment, relocation or options appraisal. But the council's plans for some of these are not imminent and in the meantime appropriate works have not been carried at existing facilities. Consequently, access for some disabled people is limited and the council is exposed to risk of legal challenge.
- 169 The corporate enforcement policy is not yet fully embedded. The policy conforms to the principles of the enforcement concordat for better regulation. However, outside of the environmental services department it is not widely applied. For example it is not mentioned in the recently adopted development control charter. This will make compliance with the concordat principles difficult to monitor and demonstrate.
- 170 The council is not demonstrating community leadership on sustainability issues by managing its own environmental impact. It does not have an accredited environmental management system or CO2 reduction/climate change strategy.

- 171 The council knows where the main local environmental problems and opportunities are. Using market towns initiative funding a healthcheck has been carried out in all three towns. Progress is most advanced in Brandon where a delivery plan aims to secure regeneration of the town. Through the Brandon heritage economic regeneration scheme, the council is helping to deliver improvements that will be noticed by local people and help create and secure jobs. Future plans include healthy living centre to be provided in partnership with the county council and others. The council understands the key issues and is therefore well placed to target resources effectively to improve the environment for local people.
- 172 Some action has been taken to achieve quality in design through the planning process. The council has adopted the Suffolk design guide as supplementary planning guidance, produced a master plan for the major development at Red Lodge and design briefs for seven other sites. It has worked with the architect for a supermarket in a prominent position in Newmarket, to secure a modern landmark building which incorporates elements of local vernacular.
- 173 The council is making effective use of planning gain. Consents granted since 2000 include contributions towards education, affordable housing, highway works and car parking. An outline consent in respect of the major developments proposed at Red Lodge will secure a package of infrastructure and facilities that will benefit the local community.
- 174 Performance on processing most planning applications has improved significantly. Forest Heath has been designated by the ODPM as a 'planning standards authority' for 2003/04 and 2004/05 for not meeting interim performance thresholds. Additionally, part of the planning delivery grant has been withheld because of poor performance on appeals. However, the council is responding positively to best value and standards inspection recommendations. Increased staffing levels, pre-application advice and increased delegation have significantly improved performance. Data for 2003/04 indicates 58 per cent of major, 56 per cent of minor and 74 per cent of other applications were processed within specified time periods, achieving the interim standards. Provisional data for the first 5 months of 2004/05 indicates that performance for minor and other applications has continued to improve standing at 83 per cent and 87 per cent respectively which exceeds the 2006/07 PSA targets. However, performance on major applications is below target having fallen to 53 per cent. Recent action taken to reduce the size of planning committee should enable the council to focus better on major applications. Consequently the council is well placed to achieve the PSA targets.
- 175 Effective action has been taken to ensure prompt planning enforcement. A policy manual has recently been approved and 91 per cent of sites were visited within 3 days of receiving a complaint in the first quarter of this year.
- 176 Most council facilities are well maintained. All public toilets have baby changing facilities and are accessible to disabled people. Children's play areas are inspected weekly. In a recent survey most parish and town councils agreed that parks and other open spaces are well maintained.
- 177 The council is easy to contact about maintenance issues. Direct dial telephone numbers and the fax number and e-mail address are publicised quarterly in Forest Heath News, together with office addresses and opening hours.

- 178 Effective progress has been made on the identification of potentially contaminated land and when this is completed sites will be prioritised for investigation or action, enabling remediation efforts to be targeted to best effect. Air quality is effectively monitored. An updating and screening assessment identified the need for a detailed assessment of NO₂ at Fiveways roundabout on the A11 and this work is in hand.

Does the council help keep the locality clean?

- 179 Very low risk of service failure and/or poor outcomes.
- 180 The council provides good waste collection services. In a recent survey of parish and town councils all respondents indicated good satisfaction with these services.
- 181 The council has clear ambitions for recycling. In partnership with other Suffolk councils it has produced a joint strategy for managing waste up to 2020. This includes the statutory recycling plan for Forest Heath which has challenging targets for exceeding the statutory performance standards set by government. The recycling plan describes a clear priority, based on field trials, for the collection of compostables and dry recyclables one week and residual waste the next. The council has been successful in gaining external funds to support its recycling ambitions and the scheme has almost district-wide coverage.
- 182 The council is effectively applying the waste hierarchy. Green waste collected at the kerbside is composted for re-use and offered for sale to residents through the household waste recycling centres. Although no progress has been made on the strategy aim to encourage community composting, a range of other measures are in place. Re-use and minimisation is encouraged through the promotion of home composting and cotton nappies. Unwanted furniture is directed to a charity and waste left beside bins is not collected. The amount of waste collected per head of population was less than most other councils in 2002/03 and it fell slightly in 2003/04 but the council is ambitious to do more. It has identified the need to minimise levels of waste as a key action for 2004/05.
- 183 The council is successfully diverting waste from landfill. Combined recycling and composting performance is very good. 28 per cent was achieved in 2002/03 (sixth best in the country) and 33 per cent in 2003/04, achieving the statutory performance standard. The council has set a target of 41 per cent for 2004/05 and provisional data indicates that this target has been exceeded in each of the first 5 months of the year. The council is planning a feasibility study into the kerbside collection of glass and the blue bin for collection of dry recyclables will be introduced in the USAF bases within the next few months. This will further increase recycling performance. Consequently, the council is well placed to deliver the 35 per cent PSA target for this year and the 40 per cent statutory performance standard set by government for 2005/06.
- 184 The local environment is kept clean. Only 20 per cent (qualified PI) of sites fell below grade B in 2003/04 and a recent survey of parish and town councils found a high satisfaction with these services. Responsible dog ownership is promoted through talks. Dog waste bins are provided and free poop scoop bags offered and there has been some enforcement action to deal with non-compliance.
- 185 Action is being planned to improve the collection of abandoned vehicles. In the last 6 months it took on average 22 days from report to removal. This is too long and in consultation with councillors improvements are being planned, for example

by improving processes and considering the introduction of an amnesty scheme. The council is aiming to remove abandoned vehicles as quickly as the law allows.

- 186 Performance is monitored but not well managed. A best value inspection of refuse and cleansing was carried out in 2003. The service was judged to be 'good' with 'promising' prospects for improvement. Progress on the improvement plan has been monitored and reported through the performance management group but a recent committee report indicates that many actions have not been delivered on time and there is a considerable amount of rescheduling. This is delaying delivery of planned improvements such as procedures to deal with rubbish on private land.

Does the council work with partners to improve community safety?

- 187 Low risk of service failure and/or poor outcomes.
- 188 The council has a clear idea about the main social cohesion and safety issues that concern local people. In a survey about quality of life issues, low crime levels were listed as one of the most important issues to local people. The crime and disorder reduction strategy is based on consultation which informed the choice and ranking of issues to be addressed. It has consistent links with other agendas. For example, the local strategic partnership and the council's own corporate plan. Capacity to deliver the strategy has increased with the appointment of a community safety coordinator and a youth development worker.
- 189 The council is meeting its responsibilities to deliver a range of initiatives under the strategy action plan to tackle anti-social behaviour, substance misuse by young people and fear of crime. Good progress has been made, for example with a youth drop in centre and constructive engagement with youths in Brandon; a youth club and turn up and play sessions in Mildenhall; and, use of CCTV which has reduced 'boy racers' in the Jubilee car park Mildenhall.
- 190 The council works effectively with partners to deliver complex agendas. Partners we spoke to were positive about the council's contribution and in a recent survey three quarters of parish and town councils felt the council works well with partners to keep crime and the fear of crime low. The partnership has adopted a layered approach to the delivery of aims through local initiatives, inter-partnership working and community led initiatives. Future plans include combining the partnerships in West Suffolk and resources have already been pooled to fund anti-social behaviour initiatives and a jointly appointed anti-social behaviour co-ordinator to improve intelligence gathering. The council is well placed to deliver a broad agenda through extended partnership working.
- 191 The council makes good use of powers to address anti-social behaviour. A targeted programme of diversionary activities for young people is delivered. Enforcement is used when necessary. An acceptable behaviour contract and three anti-social behaviour orders have been obtained to constrain individual behaviour.
- 192 In partnership the council has helped to deliver some useful initiatives to reduce crime and address fear of crime. For example a campaign to counter vehicle crime resulted 20 less thefts from vehicles over the three month campaign period across West Suffolk. The 'safe as houses' scheme provides free home security measures and advice on burglary prevention for residents over 60 years old.

- 193 The council is taking appropriate action to address the national priority for tackling substance misuse. In partnership with a range of agencies, Mildenhall Counselling Centre has provided help and advice to 110 individuals on a wide range of problems, including drug and alcohol misuse. Working with the DAT the council is helping to raise awareness of drug issues among a hard to reach group in Brandon. A bid has been submitted for Home Office funding to develop this work.
- 194 Crime levels in Forest Heath are low when compared to the national picture but high compared to the average for the Home Office family of 15 similar partnerships. Direct year on year comparison is difficult because of changes in crime recording methods from 2002/03 which has seen a general increase in recorded crimes. However, published data suggests that after rising in 2002/03, target crimes reduced during 2003/04: burglary by 17 per cent, robbery by 5 per cent and vehicle crime by 9 per cent.
- 195 The council has not yet carried out an audit as required by section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act. There are plans to address this in the next few months. But currently, apart from consulting with the police architectural liaison officer on planning matters, awareness has not been mainstreamed so as to make the best of opportunities to reduce crime and disorder through cross-cutting activity.
- 196 The first crime and disorder reduction strategy 1999/02 had limited impact. It identified 10 strategic priorities. However clear progress was made on only 2, a reduction in burglary and vehicle crime. There is no evidence of positive impacts relating to the remainder of the priorities and over the life of the strategy total crime, violent crime, public disorder and criminal damage all increased.
- 197 Performance management for delivering current strategic priorities are weak. Information sharing protocols are not in place with all partners, there is a lack of clarity about some roles and attendance of some partners is poor. The funding plan lists outputs, broad outcomes and milestones for programme delivery but no quantifiable targets are set for reduction of crime, disorder or fear of crime and in some areas there is a shortage of baseline data. On-going review of performance is limited and it will be difficult for the partnership to assess the impact of its initiatives.

Does the council contribute to activities to positively engage children and young people?

- 198 Low risk of service or function failure and/or poor outcomes.
- 199 There is a clear basis for action the council is taking to engage young people. The youth action plan 2003/05 lists a range of appropriate actions, set in consultation, for engaging young people and developing services for them. In consultation with young people and parents a need was identified for more activities and a youth drop-in centre in Mildenhall. Free turn up and play sessions were organised throughout August and the council supported the setting up of a youth club through training and pump priming funding from the crime and disorder reduction partnership. In Brandon a group of hard to reach skate board enthusiasts have been supported by the council and a youth action group established. They have engaged in community initiatives and membership has risen. These activities have helped to break down barriers between the police

and young people and incidents of criminal damage and youth nuisance have fallen.

- 200 The council has consulted thoroughly with 11 to 19 year olds to identify their needs and expectations. Under the banner 'your shout' and using a variety of media from video boxes to focus groups and on-line questionnaires, they have been asked about hobbies and activities they would like to see, this will help the council review the relevance of current activities and plan future services to engage young people.
- 201 The council is making good use of partnership working to help deliver its youth action plan 2003/05. The action plan identifies key partners for delivering each of the initiatives. In this way the council is increasing capacity to deliver a range of complex priorities.
- 202 The leisure and cultural services strategic action plan appropriately seeks to promote and facilitate the development of young people through play, active pursuits and creativity. Achievements in 2003/04 include expanding the 'active sports' programme for 8-15 year olds to include girls' football and assistance to six local sport clubs to claim a total of £23,700 in grant aid.
- 203 The council makes appropriate provision for the active recreation needs of young people. It directly provides 33 equipped play areas for young people. These include a ball court and two skate parks. There is also an indoor soft play site at the Dome and a range of facilities at the council's leisure centres. A good range of holiday activities are provided for children. These are based in and around leisure centres and include bowling, kite making, trampoline and scuba diving. The charging policy encourages participation in leisure and sporting activities by young people. Juniors (under 16) and full time students are eligible for a 50 per cent reduction on charges at leisure facilities. In a recent survey, most parish and town councils agreed that there are sufficient accessible sports and leisure facilities.
- 204 The council provides a good range of non-sporting activities appropriately targeted at young people. For example events at Brandon Country Park include a puppet workshop and story telling for three to 12 year olds and survival skills for 11-16 year olds. Themed parties for one to five year olds are offered at Brandon Leisure Centre. An officer funded by English Nature until August 2005 is providing activities such as pond dipping and art projects to engage young people. An exhibition of the art work of Newmarket school children of all ages has been staged by the council. Works in a variety of media were on display for a week and visitors were given a chance to meet the artists. The leisure and cultural services strategic action plan schedules new art, music and digital cinema projects for 2004/05. In a recent survey, most parish and town councils agreed that the council understands the needs of young people and works well with others to provide an appropriate range of activities.
- 205 An adequate policy is in place for the protection of children. It gives helpful background information and clear guidance for staff. It also specifies the additional checks that are necessary when recruiting and appointing staff who have or are likely to have contact with children. New staff are checked before appointment and a programme is in place for the checking existing staff. All front line leisure staff receive training in child protection. The council is therefore well placed to identify abuse and initiate appropriate action.

- 206 Focus on delivering the BMX track in Newmarket has been weak. Planning permission was granted in 2001 but progress has slipped and the facility is still not finished.
- 207 The council is not clear about the scale of improvement it is seeking to achieve for young people through play and informal recreation. There is a four year youth action plan but this is really just a work programme with broad timescales for initiatives. While the plan identifies performance indicators, no outcome targets have been set and the only target for increased participation is for the number of attendances at family learning events supported by the council. Consequently, the council will find it difficult to demonstrate impact and value for money.

Summary of public space diagnostic assessment judgements and strengths / weaknesses

Area of focus	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
How well does the council contribute to the management of the physical environment?	c	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support for market town healthchecks and Brandon HERS scheme • Effective use of planning gain • Faster processing of most applications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slow to integrate sustainability • Local planning policy framework out of date • Insufficient focus on DDA • Corporate enforcement policy not yet embedded
Does the council help keep the locality clean?	a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ambitious joint waste strategy • High performer with good quality 3 stream waste services • 2003/04 statutory recycling target achieved and 2005/06 target on track • Slight decline in waste collected • Clean local environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvement plan actions slipped behind schedule
Does the council work with partners to improve community safety?	b	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Range of appropriate initiatives and recent reduction in target crimes in 2003/04 • Some good examples of partnership working and pooling of resources • Good use of ASB powers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No mainstreaming audit • Weak performance management arrangements
Does the council contribute to activities to positively engage children and young people?	b	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plans informed by consultation • Good range of activities and opportunities across age ranges • Child protection policy and training in place 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Late delivery of BMX track in Newmarket • Lack of clear targets for improvement
Public space diagnostic assessment judgement		B	

Scoring key

For each of the key areas looked at within the diagnostic assessments **the need for improvement**, based upon the risk of service failure and poor outcomes, is identified using the following scale.

- a = very low
- b = low
- c = high
- d = very high

Appendix 3 - Appointed auditor assessment

208 Appointed auditors are asked to score five areas which relate to the statutory code of audit practice. When scoring each area a range of issues are taken into account. These issues and the score that has been given in each area are set out in the table below.

Area for auditor judgement	Grade	Issues included in this area
Financial standing	3	Setting a balanced budget Setting a capital programme Financial monitoring and reporting Meeting financial targets Financial reserves
Systems of internal financial control	3	Monitoring of financial systems An adequate internal audit function is maintained Risk identification and management
Standards of financial conduct and the prevention and detection of fraud and corruption	4	Ethical framework Governance arrangements Treasury management Prevention and detection of fraud and corruption
Financial statements	2	Timeliness Quality Supporting records
Legality of significant financial transactions	4	Roles and responsibilities Consideration of legality of significant financial transactions New legislation

Scoring key

1 = inadequate

2 = adequate overall, but some weaknesses that need to be addressed

3 = adequate

4 = good

Appendix 4 - Benefit Fraud Inspectorate assessment

209 The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate (BFI) has undertaken the assessment in this appendix as part of the CPA process. The assessment covers two aspects, the current level of performance and the council's proven capacity to improve. Each assessment is measured on a five-point scale (poor, fair, fair to good, good and excellent).

Current performance

210 Forest Heath Council's benefits service was being delivered by the Anglia revenues and benefits partnership (the partnership) but the council remained responsible and accountable for the benefits service provided to customers within its area.

211 Overall, we found that the benefits service provided by Forest Heath Council was providing a **fair** performance. Forest Heath Council's current performance demonstrates a number of strengths. These include:

- ◆ annual plans focused on performance against key performance indicators, with results monitored formally by senior officers and members;
- ◆ the benefits service used its best value improvement plan as a key driver;
- ◆ structured performance monitoring with weekly team meetings and regular formalised reporting to members;
- ◆ fully compliant with the verification framework and the registered social landlords' staff were doing claim verification;
- ◆ interactive service delivery through the internet, including access to claims using personal identification numbers (but its accessibility to benefits customers had not been evaluated);
- ◆ landlord conferences had been held with positive feedback;
- ◆ risk-based approach to audit work led to annual audits;
- ◆ fraud referrals were assessed against standard criteria;
- ◆ interventions were dealt with by visits from counter-fraud officers;
- ◆ underlying entitlement was emphasised in overpayment training and procedures;
- ◆ County Court judgements obtained in all appropriate cases; and
- ◆ diary dates used to identify when changes of circumstances likely.

212 However there are some areas where Forest Heath Council needs to develop further to fully meet the BFI and Department for Work and Pensions' (the Department) Performance Standards framework. These include:

- ◆ the standards set for the key claims processing best value performance indicators were not being achieved;
- ◆ targets had not been set for overpayments other than for the national best value performance indicator;
- ◆ local performance indicators were not in place;
- ◆ the council's race equality scheme had not been put into effect;
- ◆ benefits take-up had been assigned a low priority;
- ◆ the component costs of benefits administration were not being monitored;
- ◆ operational plans lacked details as to how specific aims and targets were to be achieved;
- ◆ there had been a significant fall in counter-fraud activity but, although new staff had been recruited, there were no specific or detailed plans to reverse this trend; and
- ◆ the fraud team was reactive with no plans to become proactive.

Proven capacity to improve

213 We assessed Forest Heath Council's proven capacity to improve as **fair towards good**. Forest Heath Council was able to demonstrate the following positive aspects:

- ◆ entering the partnership with Breckland Council and moving all its benefits service staff into the partnership's accommodation in a Breckland Council office;
- ◆ achieving the staff savings from the partnership that were set out in the business case;
- ◆ openness about issues and weaknesses identified in audits and surveys, and involvement of staff and stakeholders in plans to address such matters;
- ◆ commitment to partnerships and joint working;
- ◆ significant investment in staff training;
- ◆ record of success in bids for external funding;
- ◆ proven project and change management skills; and
- ◆ a performance management and reporting framework, with reporting in appropriate detail at each level including members.

214 However, the following areas led us to question the extent to which Forest Heath Council was able to demonstrate its capacity to improve:

- ◆ action plans across the benefits service were lacking in detail and did not show how targets and objectives would be achieved;

- ◆ the benefits service was essentially reactive to corporate strategies and did not proactively research and set out its own specific strategies, aims and objectives;
- ◆ reaction to a significant decline in counter-fraud activity had been confined to recruiting and training replacement staff. The scope of the benefits service's fraud operation had not been reviewed or evaluated to take account of these factors; and
- ◆ there was a lack of local management information that would allow specific performance issues to be identified - only the national key performance objectives were being fully monitored.

Appendix 5 - Framework for Comprehensive Performance Assessment

- 215 This comprehensive performance assessment was carried out under the Local Government Act 1999. Local councils have a general duty under Section 3 of this Act to secure continuous improvement in the exercise of their functions. Section 10 gives the Audit Commission the power to inspect councils' performance of the general duty of improvement.
- 216 The main elements of the assessment were:
- ◆ a self-assessment completed by the council;
 - ◆ accredited peer challenge to inform the council's self-assessment;
 - ◆ a corporate assessment of the council's overall effectiveness in supporting services to deliver improvements;
 - ◆ an assessment of the council's service delivery performance through two diagnostic assessments on:
 - ◆ management of public space;
 - ◆ contribution to developing a balanced housing market;
 - ◆ Benefit Fraud Inspectorate's (BFI) assessment of benefit services;
 - ◆ appointed auditor assessments of performance on each of the main elements of the code of audit practice; and
 - ◆ audited performance indicators, inspection reports and plan assessments.
- 217 The assessment for Forest Heath District Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 6th September to 10th September 2004.
- 218 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.