

Service Inspection Report

May 2006



# **Environment - Environmental Services**

**Chester-le-Street District Council**

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## Service Inspection

This inspection has been carried out by the Audit Commission under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999 and is in line with the Audit Commission's strategic regulation principles. These principles embody the objectives of our Strategic Plan and Strategic Regulation. They also reflect the principles from *The Government's Policy on Inspection of Public Services (July 2003)*.

Audit Commission service inspections should:

- focus on public service outcomes from a user perspective;
- act as a catalyst to help inspected bodies improve their performance;
- concentrate inspection work where it will have most impact, so that it is proportionate and based on an assessment of risk;
- be based on a rigorous assessment of costs and benefits, with a concern for achieving value for money both by the inspected organisation and within the inspection regime itself;
- be, and be seen to be, independent of the inspected organisation;
- report in public, using impartial evidence to inform the public about the performance of public services so as to enhance accountability;
- involve collaborative working with other inspectorates and external review agencies to achieve greater co-ordination and a more holistic approach to the assessment of performance by audited and inspected bodies;
- share learning to create a common understanding of performance that encourages rigorous self assessment and better understanding of their performance by inspected organisations;
- be carried out objectively by skilled and experienced people to high standards and using relevant evidence, transparent criteria, and open review processes; and
- enable continuous learning so that inspections can become increasingly effective and efficient.

We assess services using published key lines of enquiry (KLOE) to inform our judgements. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's web site at [www.audit-commission.gov.uk](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk).

This report is issued in accordance with the Audit Commission's duty under Section 13 of the 1999 Act.

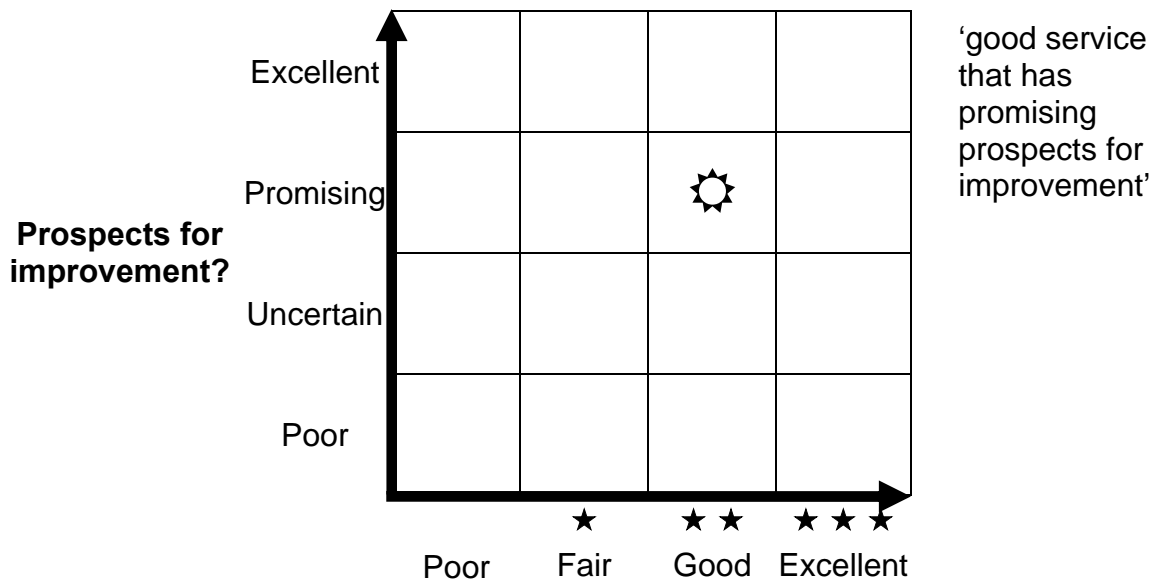
## Summary

- 1 Chester-le-Street District Council is delivering good environmental services with promising prospects for improvement.
- 2 The Council has clear aims for environmental services that link to the wider aims of the community and national priorities. With partners, the Council has refocused future plans to further minimise the amount of waste being produced and going to landfill sites. However, links between strategies, policies and service standards are not always clear.
- 3 The Council is well placed to exceed its statutory recycling target for 2005/06, recycling and composting rates have increased in the last year from 12.5 per cent to 30.2 per cent. This is as a result of increased promotional and educational activity which has encouraged people to think about the waste they produce. Efforts to minimise waste through initiatives such as the 'crocodile bin' campaign and the sale of home composters have been successful, resulting in a slight reduction in the amount of waste collected in 2004/05, against national trends. The streets and local recreation areas of Chester-Le-Street are clean and residents have increasing opportunities to enjoy the local wild life through biodiversity and conservation work with communities.
- 4 The service can demonstrate a significant track record in recent years that has delivered improving performance that local people and service users can recognise. Satisfaction is generally increasing, and improvements can be demonstrated through external quality accreditations. Costs are comparatively low but the service can not yet fully demonstrate that it is delivering value for money across all areas of the service.
- 5 The service has strong corporate and political support. Investment in resources and management has improved the service's capacity and there are good calibre staff who are committed to driving improvements through partnership working.
- 6 Managers have good information to monitor and manage service performance. However, procurement and asset management arrangements at the corporate level are still in development and have yet to make a positive impact on the service.
- 7 The Council is reducing the effect of its activities on the environment through initiatives such as recycling its own waste, use of green energy and reduction of transport impact. However, the Council does not do enough to ensure that residents and other organisations fully understand the service's activities and aims.

## Scoring the service

- 8 We have assessed Chester-le-Street as providing a ‘good’ two-star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

**Table 1 Scoring chart<sup>1</sup>**



### A good service?

Source: Audit Commission

- 9 The service is a good, two-star service due to the following reasons.
- There are generally above average levels of satisfaction with environmental services with good service outcomes during 2005/06.
  - The service is increasing the opportunity for residents to use open spaces through biodiversity and conservation work with communities.
  - The Council maintains high levels of cleanliness in the district measured as top quartile performance in 2004/05.
  - The Council is meeting recycling and composting targets, rates have increased in the last year from 12.5 per cent to 30.2 per cent in 2005/06.

<sup>1</sup> The scoring chart displays performance in two dimensions. The horizontal axis shows how good the service or function is now, on a scale ranging from no stars for a service that is poor (at the left-hand end) to three stars for an excellent service (right-hand end). The vertical axis shows the improvement prospects of the service, also on a four-point scale.

- There is a proactive approach to waste minimisation which has resulted in a slight reduction in the amount of household waste collected, against a national trend of increased amounts.
- The service is working more closely with communities through new practices such as zonal working and neighbourhood management pilots in two areas.
- It has received environmental awards include Green Flag, Green Apple and a Gold Award at the Tatton Royal Horticultural Society show.

However:

- communication of the Council's overall approach to sustaining the environment and the services provided is not fully effective;
  - the service lacks a consistent approach to managing value for money, and consequently may not be maximising its use of resources; and
  - agreements between the service and its partners and other Council departments are not robust with few service level agreements in place.
- 10 The service has promising prospects for improvement due to the following reasons.
- The service can demonstrate a significant track record in recent years that has delivered improving performance through new and improved working practices and enhanced services that users recognise.
  - Satisfaction with services and facilities is generally increasing.
  - The Council is an effective environmental leader and the service has strong corporate and political support.
  - The service has a good calibre of staff who are committed to driving improvements for their customers.
  - There is good partnership working to increase the service's capacity to deliver.
  - Plans for the future showing how the service will contribute to corporate and community priorities are set out in service plans and are supported by the Council's performance management system.
  - The performance management system and the links between some strategies, policies and standards are not fully complete.
  - Procurement and asset management arrangements at the corporate level are still in development and have yet to make a positive impact on the service.

## Recommendations

- 11 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, councils need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the Council. In addition we identify the approximate costs<sup>2</sup> and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context the inspection team recommends that the council should do the following.

### **Recommendation**

*R1 Improve communication, including feedback to local residents, of the Council's overall approach to sustaining the environment and the services provided.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- better community leadership and increased community involvement;
- reinforcement of positive educational and promotional messages; and
- changing attitudes towards waste and the environment.

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs. This should be implemented immediately.

### **Recommendation**

*R2 Formalise agreements with partners and other Council departments who contribute to the delivery of or require the use of environmental services.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved outcomes for residents;
- clearer understanding of what standards of service are required; and
- improved performance management and reporting.

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs. This should be implemented immediately.

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<sup>2</sup> Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 per cent and high cost is over 5 per cent.



**Recommendation**

*R3 Improve the framework under which the service is delivered by linking strategies, policies and standards.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- delivery of a more seamless service across the district;
- increased focus on priorities;
- more consistent plans; and
- opportunity for improved communication of co-ordinated approach to service delivery.

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs. This should be implemented within six months.

**Recommendation**

*R4 Expand value for money assessment to all areas of the service through analysis of the benefits of expected outcomes from decision making, investment and community involvement against the costs of providing the service and making the best use of resources through procurement, asset management and benchmarking of costs.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- greater focus on the impact of money invested in the service on outcomes for residents;
- increased efficiency of services; and
- increased ability of the Council to demonstrate value for money to local taxpayers.

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs. This should be implemented within the next six months.

# Report

## Context

### The locality

- 12 Chester-le-Street District Council is one of the smallest districts within County Durham with a population of 54,000. It covers 66 square kilometres with a mix of urban and rural areas. The town has a mainline railway station, is close to the A1 and has good transport links.
- 13 The local economy and employment patterns have changed significantly since the end of coal mining in the district. The district has for some years served commuters who work in neighbouring Durham, Newcastle upon Tyne and Sunderland but is now attracting investment to develop local business opportunities. Unemployment has fallen significantly during recent years and at 2.1 per cent is now below the regional and national averages.
- 14 Whilst there are no large pockets of extreme deprivation, six of the wards are within the 20 per cent most deprived in the country. Ethnic minority communities make up 1.65 per cent of the population.
- 15 The district has areas of natural beauty and important wildlife habitats including the Cong Burn local nature reserve and Waldrige Fell, which is County Durham's only area of lowland heath. The Riverside development has turned a 50 hectare site near to Chester-le-Street town centre into a recreation area which incorporates Durham County Cricket Club's ground, many sports facilities; a wildlife area recently designated a Local Nature Reserve and the award winning Riverside Park.

### The Council

- 16 The Council has 34 councillors, comprising 29 Labour, one Conservative and four Independents. A leader and executive structure has been in place since 2001, supported by three scrutiny committees managed by an Overview and Management Board. The current political leadership has been in place since May 2003.
- 17 The Council employs 577 staff and manages a gross budget of about £55 million. A new Chief Executive was appointed in June 2004, and subsequently a new corporate management team, comprising Directors of Resources, Development and Community Services, Assistant Chief Executive and Head of Organisational Development was appointed. Services are now structured in three Directorates: Corporate Resources; Development and Community Services; and the Assistant Chief Executive.

- 18 Following a CPA assessment of 'poor' in 2003/4, the Council developed an Improvement and Recovery Plan (IRP). The IRP received ministerial approval in September 2004. The Council has developed a successor plan (IRP2); this was accepted by the Government Monitoring Board for the Council in November 2005.

### **The Council's environmental service**

- 19 Environmental services are part of the Development and Community Services Directorate and are responsible for:
- refuse collection including household, bulky and trade waste;
  - recycling and waste minimisation including a free green waste collection on request;
  - street cleansing including removal of fly tipping and enforcement;
  - grounds care maintenance;
  - bereavement services responsible for maintenance of three council cemeteries; and
  - promotion of environmental issues including biodiversity, waste reuse, reduction and recycling through education programmes and community activities.
- 20 The majority of the work is carried out directly by 76 Council staff. The service net revenue budget for 2005/06 is just under £2.3 million, with expected income of £905,143 and capital financing costs of £64,310. As part of the budget setting process for 2005/06, to address a revenue funding shortfall, a decision was taken to buy out all existing operational leases including those in relation to fleet and other operational equipment. As a result much of the fleet was replaced with new acquisitions.
- 21 The Council provides a wheeled bin refuse collection service to 24,390 domestic properties each week and an external contractor provides a fortnightly kerbside recycling collection of paper, cans and glass to all domestic properties in the district. There are also six bring sites in the district providing residents the opportunity to recycle glass, cans, paper and textiles. The Council provides a free green waste collection of up to six bags on request and a bulky waste collection service charge of £5 for up to six items. There were 4,836 bulky waste collections in 2004/05. The Council has trade waste agreements with 378 commercial premises, 14 charities and 27 schools delivering a small profit but the service is to be reviewed for viability. Clinical waste is collected fortnightly from defined properties by a specialist sub-contractor. The 2005/06 refuse collection budget is £814,760, a 2.2 per cent reduction on the previous year.

- 22 Chester-le-Street District Council is a waste collection authority and works with the county council and the other six district councils to deliver the County Durham Joint Municipal Waste Management Strategy which is currently being reviewed and redrafted. A Local Public Service Level Agreement (LPSA) is in place between the County Council, Chester-le-Street and two other districts and the external recycling contractor for kerbside recycling to contribute to the 18 per cent recycling target for 2005/06.
- 23 Durham County Council manages the disposal of all waste collected by Chester-le-Street Council, which delivers waste collected to a transfer station at Annfield Plain. From there waste is disposed of at a treatment centre in Thornley, which contributes to Chester-le-Street's composting level, or to landfill sites. The County Council also manages one civic amenity centre in the district for residents to dispose of larger items of household waste. The 2005/06 environmental management budget is £101,550, a 13.9 per cent increase on the previous year.
- 24 The street care service provides daytime cleansing of streets, public spaces, disposal of litter and dog-waste bin contents and removal of fly tipping. Teams work in four zones and have close links with the ground care service. Additional funding in 2005/06 was targeted at improving the street care function through neighbourhood environmental teams and increased enforcement activity. The 2005/06 cleansing budget is £679,890, a 27 per cent increase on the previous year.
- 25 The grounds care function includes grass-cutting, shrub bed maintenance and provision of seasonal bedding. The service also has specialist arborist expertise and seeks to add value to the environment and biodiversity of the area through its operations. The service maintains sports facilities and parks on behalf of Leisure Services and open plan gardens and older people's gardens on behalf of the Housing department. The 2005/06 grounds maintenance budget is £457,670, a 5.5 per cent increase on the previous year.

## National context

### Waste

- 26 There are clear targets imposed on all councils to deal with their municipal waste in a sustainable manner. The National Waste Strategy 2000 sets out the Government's waste policy and outlines longer-term targets that include recovering value from 40 per cent of municipal waste by 2010. In order to deliver the shorter-term targets the Government has set statutory recycling and composting targets for each council in England and Wales. The targets for Chester-le-Street District Council are 10 per cent in 2003/04 and 18 per cent in 2005/06. It is likely that the Government will set further statutory targets for councils to achieve in 2010 to ensure that they meet the longer-term national targets.

- 27 Under European directives the amount of biodegradable waste disposed of by landfilling must also reduce. Targets set for Great Britain are by 2010 to reduce the amount of biodegradable waste landfilled to 75 per cent of that produced in 1995 and intermediate targets are set to progressively bring this down to 35 per cent by 2020. In order to meet this directive the Government under the Waste and Emissions Trading Act of 2003 established the Landfill Allowance Trading Scheme (LATS). Under this scheme the Government allocates each WDA a set number of permits for the amount of municipal waste that they can dispose of by landfilling. These started in April 2005 and reduce every year thereafter. If councils landfill less than their allowances they can 'bank' them for future years or 'sell' them to other councils. Councils who exceed their allowances will either have to 'buy' permits from other councils at the going market rate or face fines of £150 per tonne. It is clear therefore that all councils must face these challenges and have plans and strategies to meet them.
- 28 The Government also requires a county wide strategy<sup>3</sup> for the management of municipal waste. Guidance issued by the Government states that municipal waste management strategies should be integrated with other council plans and strategies and should:
- set a strategic framework for the future management of municipal waste;
  - integrate policies for the collection, treatment and disposal of waste; and
  - consider partnerships with other councils, community groups and businesses.

### **Street cleansing**

- 29 The Environmental Protection Act 1990 (EPA) contains provisions relating to litter. The Act gives a local authority (a 'principal litter authority') power to deal with litter based problems affecting their area, including issuing fixed penalty tickets to people who commit an offence by dropping litter. Councils have a duty to keep their land clear of litter. A Code of Practice, issued under the Act, recommends a 'clean as necessary' approach, subject to regular monitoring, rather than a set frequency for every street or location.
- 30 The code also recommends specific levels of cleanliness and response times according to the type of urban environment. For example, a town centre area deemed to be 'generally littered', should receive attention within three hours whereas a low-density residential area can expect action within 12 hours. Four standards of cleanliness are specified ranging from grade A (predominantly free of litter) to grade D (heavily littered). The code was updated in 2000, increasing the minimum acceptable level of cleaning required in Zone 3 - low density residential areas.
- 31 The Dog (Fouling of Land) Act 1996 gives local authorities the power to impose controls relating to dog fouling on designated land in their area and the EPA enables the issue of fixed penalty tickets to owners who fail to remove dog faeces.

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<sup>3</sup> Under the Waste and Emissions Trading Act 2003 waste authorities in two-tier areas must produce a joint strategy for the management of municipal waste by April 2005.

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- 32 Abandoned vehicles are a national problem with an increasing number of vehicles. The Refuse Disposal (Amenity) Act 1978 contains controls for the removal and disposal.
- 33 The Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005 contains a range of measures to improve the quality of the local environment by giving Local Authorities and the Environment Agency additional powers to deal with: fly-tipped waste; litter; nuisance alleys; fly-posting and graffiti; abandoned and nuisance vehicles; dogs; noise; nuisance from artificial lighting and insect, and other issues affecting the local environment.

## How good is the service?

### What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 34 The service's aims are aligned to the corporate aims of the Council. The environmental service has its own vision 'to provide a clean safe and attractive environment' supported by six key objectives set out in the Service Plan. This both supports the Council vision of 'working together to fulfil the needs of our communities' and underpins one of the four key aims of the Community Strategy, 'an attractive and protected environment'.
- 35 The county wide joint municipal waste management strategy, gave Durham councils a clear focus on what needs to be achieved in the short term to 2005/06, and identified options for dealing with long term issues to be addressed as and when appropriate solutions have been agreed. However, it did not address the issue of the reduction of biodegradable waste over time. The strategy, agreed in August 2000, set targets for the County Council and districts to achieve national recycling and composting targets of 10 per cent in 2003/04 and 18 per cent in 2005/06.
- 36 The Council's aims to improve the environment in the district are encapsulated in the Council's biodiversity strategy 'parks to larks' which identifies how the service and particularly horticultural services plans to improve and sustain the environment for residents.
- 37 The Council's draft Sustainable Environment Policy is a statement of the Council's commitment to reduce and recycle its own waste and the principles to be implemented in all Council departments. It contains statements of intent, but no targets for the Council or individual departments. Plans are in place to develop PIs.
- 38 The service has developed a number of policies to focus its work. These include policies for biodiversity, recycling, bonfire control, urban trees and customer service standards. The service's strategy is to deliver effective environment management through its quality procedures rather than a specific environmental management system. A recent report by an MSc student assessed links between quality and environmental management for the horticultural service and the Council is using the findings to develop environmental management in the Council further.
- 39 Streetscene was identified as a priority by residents in the 2004 survey and this contributed to the Council's 2005 corporate plan prioritising Customer Excellence and Neighbourhood Management as specific areas for improvement. Environmental service priorities are focused on customers and are gearing up the service for Neighbourhood Management following pilots in two areas.

## **Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users?**

### **Access and engagement**

- 40** The Council is using the views of residents to improve services. Analysis of resident surveys is informing improvements and changes to working practices, such as cleansing zonal working and neighbourhood management, are increasing the service contact and involvement with communities. This enables the service to respond to specific community issues. For example, at Pelton Fell the emphasis is on conservation and at Grange Villa it is more about changing the recycling collection to satisfy residents.
- 41** The Council is engaging more with the community to design and deliver improved services and improve their quality of life, particularly in the two neighbourhood management pilots which are based on good engagement and understanding of the needs of local people. As a result the community is more knowledgeable and has a more positive attitude to the services being delivered. Another example of working with partners in the community was the Streetsafe initiative in Sacriston, completed in 2005, it improved the environment, including tackling graffiti, and reduced anti social behaviour, fly tipping and instances of abandoned cars.
- 42** The service is adopting appropriate arrangements for consulting, engaging and communicating with users and non-users. Officers attend community groups, federations, parish councils and LSP community engagement groups and are proactive in raising awareness of biodiversity, waste and recycling issues and opportunities. Examples include campaigns in schools, environment or 'womble' days in the community and an environmental citizenship award scheme. The Council is reviewing existing forms of community engagement. It has the baseline data on current levels of engagement and is generating opportunities for engaging with people who are at risk of exclusion, but engagement is not yet advanced enough to comprehensively influence design and delivery of the service.
- 43** The service is accessible and responds to issues raised by residents. Examples include working with partners in neighbourhood management pilot areas to prevent parking damage to grass verges by hardening verges and more frequent emptying of dog bins in heavily used areas. Measured response times for service requests and complaints are within target times.
- 44** The Council's arrangements to feedback to customers are underdeveloped. The Council's waste collection and recycling policy is set out in a booklet distributed to all households but this does not include standards of service that can be expected and there are limited arrangements at present to ensure that customer information is received and understood adequately. The service has now produced a clear comprehensive set of service standards following engagement with community associations and tenant panels. These were approved recently at full council, but have not yet been communicated to residents.



- 45 There is a wide range of environmental information available and the Council does a lot of good work in many areas to improve the environment, but key messages about what the Council is trying to achieve are not getting across to residents. The Council's website has recently been redesigned and provides a good framework to enable services to build on the content, however environmental services information on the Council's website is limited at present. This inhibits people's ability to gain a full knowledge of the services provided.
- 46 The Council has a good schools programme to educate young people about the environment. The service has built on the successful Schools Recycling Project to 3,000 pupils in 2004 to deliver a good education programme to schools aimed at improving environmental citizenship. Working with partners, the service has delivered a one day workshop session to year 5 classes in eight out of 27 schools across the district. This includes wild life garden projects and comprehensive biodiversity projects at South Pelaw and St Bennets schools, the latter winning the Council's good environmental citizens award. However there is still considerable scope to engage with the remaining schools.
- 47 The Council is starting to design the delivery of the service to embrace equality, diversity and human rights. The recently adopted Equality and Diversity (E&D) policy action plan includes proposals to build E&D into the service delivery plan. There are a range of outcomes from the plan aimed at placing the service in a better position to ensure that all users, or potential users, have fair and equal access. The Council has established a district partnership along with the police to engage with, people at risk of exclusion and young people. This has resulted in the Council providing information in a range of formats and improving physical access to services.
- 48 The Council is improving physical access to services such as by making cemeteries safer and more accessible to disabled people. It has completed a risk assessment of headstones and has started on a repair schedule working with accredited stonemasons for sustainable designs. It has also improved footpaths in some cemeteries and is increasing access to wildlife through horticultural work with the Durham Wildlife Trust. The refuse collection assisted list scheme is well received and its effectiveness is reviewed every three years through user satisfaction questionnaires.

### **Waste, cleansing and enforcement**

- 49 The Council is meeting national waste targets. The 2004 recycling and composting target of 10 per cent was met and the Council forecasts that it will meet the 2006, 18 per cent target on the basis of current performance, reported as 15 per cent recycling and 15.2 per cent composting. The significantly increased rates in the last year are because promotional and educational activity has increased, including visits to households to explain what can be recycled, and because more waste is treated, contributing to the amount composted, rather than landfilled.

- 50 The Council is proactive in its efforts to increase recycling levels. Bring sites are generally clean and in convenient locations although most lack both educational and adequate contact information. There are good working relationships with the external contractor who confirms that recycling on the kerbside scheme has increased due to a combination of new policies and educational activities in the last year. Policies such as no side waste and initiatives such as a media campaign and bin stickers with the 'crocodile bin' policy information to limit the waste allowed in bins have all helped to improve recycling rates. Staff are also available to help people understand how to segregate their waste for increased recycling and many residents requested a home visit following the 'crocodile bin' sticker campaign. Assessment of the 'crocodile bin' campaign measured increased recycling participation from 50 per cent to 60 per cent and increased tonnage collected for recycling by 25 per cent.
- 51 Council activities are reducing the amounts of waste it collects. For example the Council has provided free home composters for the last four years and this year distributed 1,588 free ROTATE funded home composters to houses in the district. There was a slight decrease in the amount of household waste collected in 2004/05 from 420 to 419 kg per head. This remained third quartile performance but was still above the 2002/03 figure of 410kg.
- 52 Community composting is encouraged through a Service Level Agreement with Teesdale conservationists ROTTERS to provide guidance to community groups. This supports community enterprise and encourages resident participation in larger composting schemes to reduce waste amounts collected for landfill. However there is scope for the Council to become more involved in community composting. Bournmoor residents are reviewing the feasibility of implementing a scheme but have received only limited support from the Council.
- 53 The Council is increasing activity to reduce amounts of waste sent to landfill. There have been two DEFRA funded Waste Implementation Programme (WIP) projects. One related to participation, promotion and public perception and stimulated a countywide bid on joint communications. The other looked to maximise reuse and recycling from the bulky goods collection service. This resulted in green waste collected by the Council's free service being diverted for composting rather than landfill and increased support for local enterprise groups reusing furniture. The Council now diverts all furniture calls to a local furniture and fabric group. The bulky waste service has also improved its service to residents by introducing a pre-determined collection day when it started to make a small charge of £5 to cover costs.
- 54 The Council maintains high levels of cleanliness in the district. The introduction of zonal working has proved a success through improved cleanliness and increasing the visible presence of the team, resulting in positive feedback from tenants, residents and councillors. Current performance is measured as 8 per cent of land with deposits of litter or detritus outside acceptable levels, compared to 11 per cent in 2004/05. This is well within the government target of 30 per cent and remains best quartile performance when compared with other authorities.

There are, however, some isolated instances of rubbish in gardens which some residents link to the policy that over full bins are not emptied. The cleansing service is working with the Council's housing service to resolve this issue.

- 55 Waste that is hazardous to health is handled appropriately. Cleansing operatives are trained in needle collection and respond within one hour. Asbestos is removed by a private contractor and clinical household waste by specialists. Tyres are stockpiled at a depot until the contractor removes them for shredding.
- 56 The Council is proactively tackling environmental and anti social issues. The Council has reorganised enforcement by merging town centre wardens with the environmental enforcement team and increased enforcement activity in the last year to discourage environmental crime and promote the well being of the environment. The number of fixed penalty notices increased from eight in 2004/05 to 26 in the first nine months of 2005/06. Abandoned vehicles are not seen as a problem in the district and hot spots for fly tipping are known and monitored.
- 57 The Council encourages minimisation and recycling of its own waste. There are some good recycling initiatives to reduce paper consumption, which is measured and reported back to staff and green energy procurement and bio-diesel vehicles aim to reduce the impact of activities on the environment. However, activities are not managed to enable the Council to promote the messages to other organisations through its own actions.

### **Environment and open space management**

- 58 The Council is providing community leadership to improve services in relation to biodiversity through empowering local residents. The Council has also worked with community groups and Durham Wildlife Trust to secure lottery funding for local community environment groups, to deliver a district wide, self guided walking trail, which highlights work of local groups in improving their local areas. This has resulted in environmental improvements, and long term benefit for wildlife, the community and visitors to the district.
- 59 The Council is increasing access to areas of green space and areas of wildlife and involving local people in improvements. This includes supporting the formation of the Federation of Chester-le-Street Environmental Groups and the activities of the groups where possible. The Chester West Community Garden project has received assistance (topsoil and composters) and advice to convert old allotments into a good garden facility for the community.
- 60 The service is recognised nationally for its work on grounds care, biodiversity and community engagement. The Riverside Park retained green flag status for a second year and part of it was recently designated a Local Nature Reserve (LNR). The Horticultural apprentices won the gold medal award at a 2005 RHS Show and the Green Apple award was received for improving community engagement, satisfaction and access to conservation activities.

- 61 The service is contributing to the Council addressing sustainability issues through input to planning policies to ensure sustainable developments and developing guidance for its own operations through a sustainable environment policy. The service is a statutory consultee for planning policy development and the sustainability officer is actively involved in planning policy development. It is taking positive steps to reduce CO2 emissions. A Tree Policy and protocol is raising standards of tree maintenance and ensuring trees removed are replaced with new. Other examples are the assistance to establish a carbon-neutral village for 100 properties at Edmondsley and an infra-red survey of hotspots for energy efficiency is to follow on from Warm and Healthy Homes Standards grants to reduce residents' energy consumption and costs.
- 62 Satisfaction levels with environmental services measured in the last Best Value satisfaction survey in 2003/04 and recent Council surveys are generally positive with:
- satisfaction with the waste collection service second quartile, 87 per cent in 2003/04;
  - satisfaction with parks and open spaces second quartile, 66 per cent in 2003/04;
  - satisfaction with waste recycling facilities top quartile, 87 per cent in 2003/04;
  - satisfaction with the standard of cleanliness was third quartile 65 per cent in the 2003/04 survey; the Council's 2005 annual survey showed increased satisfaction from previous years; and
  - high levels of satisfaction with the trade waste service; in a recent survey of customers as part of a review of the service only one of 141 was slightly dissatisfied.

### **Is the service delivering value for money?**

- 63 The service is starting to identify improvement in outcomes from increased involvement with communities linked to decisions for investment and new methods of working. However the Council is not able to clearly demonstrate that it is delivering value for money in all areas of environmental services.
- 64 The Council is allocating resources to environmental services in response to local consultation. In the 2004 residents survey 74 per cent of residents wanted to see more money spent on a cleaner environment. As a result the Council made £78,000 available for sustainable improvements. This is in line with local priorities in the community strategy and the Council only allocating growth to priority areas for services aiming to provide value for money. Environmental services are now high profile services that customers like. This is demonstrated by compliments received and councillors receiving positive feedback.
- 65 The way in which the service is designing services and procuring equipment is aimed at achieving value for money. For example, investment in ICT and vehicle tracking systems is expected to bring efficiency savings. The buy out of operational leases for vehicles and equipment improved the fleet and addressed a revenue funding shortfall.

- 66** Service costs compare favourably to others, allowing for local context, performance and policy choices that the Council has made. The cost of waste collection per household fell in 2004/05 from £38.41 to £37.51 per household, below average cost in comparison to other authorities. The trade waste contract yields £25,000 profit per annum and attains good satisfaction levels and investment in other areas of environmental services is delivering improved outcomes such as increased satisfaction, cleanliness, maintenance and access to open spaces. More detailed APSE benchmarking with a small family group of similar authorities and all district councils indicates comparable mid range costs which, when assessed against the Council size and satisfaction levels, points to value for money.
- 67** The service is working towards demonstrating value for money in some areas.
- Through the neighbourhood management pilots, it is delivering local services in partnership with other agencies such as the police and fire services, joint initiatives such as Street safe and their approach to policing bonfires, which has resulted in savings of £35,000 for partners.
  - Working smarter through zonal working has improved performance and customer satisfaction and removed duplication of effort.
  - It has introduced a charging system for bulky waste collection, but at the same time introduced an improvement in naming the day of collection. As a result the Council has made the service more cost effective and improved efficiency and standards for customers.
  - The Council is making good use of its staff resources by developing its own arbour team, the members of which have generic skills and are therefore a flexible resource.
- 68** However, the Council overall is not consistently demonstrating value for money. Most services are delivered in house and the new procurement strategy has not been implemented. There is no corporate approach to asset management. Benchmarking is limited, making it difficult for the Council to assess whether its services are of the best quality for cost. There are no robust service level agreements between internal providers in place and so the Council cannot demonstrate value for money for inter-departmental services or know whether services between directorates are of the required standard.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

### What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 69 The Council has performed well in implementing changes arising from inspection, Comprehensive Performance Assessment and its subsequent Improvement and Recovery Programme and also through assessment by the Government, the Audit Commission and peer review. These changes have influenced environmental services' approach to biodiversity and designing waste services in such a way that users can experience a better quality of service, focusing on customers and in particular on the more disadvantaged and those in priority need.
- 70 The service has responded positively to address the recommendations from an inspection of refuse collection in 2001/02 which judged that it was a 'fair' service that was 'likely to improve'. It has increased its strategic capacity to drive improvements in its approach to biodiversity, recycling, education and performance management.
- 71 The service has also improved through corporately led initiatives resulting from the Improvement and Recovery Programme, which was put in place following Corporate Assessment in 2003/04. Two areas within the programme that the service has emphasised as areas for improvement are customer excellence and neighbourhood management.
- 72 Improvements in service delivery which can be evidenced by performance indicators from 2002/03 to 2004/05 show:
- a reduced amount of household waste collected;
  - a reduction of missed bins from 338 to 121;
  - a reduced cost of waste collection; and
  - top quartile performance in cleanliness levels.
- 73 Satisfaction with the service is increasing following improvements introduced in the last two years. The number of complaints to the service has reduced considerably in the last two years, from 894 in 2003/04 to 481 for nine months of the current year. This includes a significant reduction in streetcare litter complaints down from 317 to 89 in 2005/06.
- 74 Customer satisfaction levels within environmental services measured in the last Best Value survey in 2003/04 were generally positive with improved or only slight reductions in satisfaction, except for cleanliness, which the Council has responded to through improving work practices and increasing enforcement activity resulting in top quartile cleanliness levels in 2004/05. A recent survey undertaken in November 2005 indicates improvements in satisfaction across most services, including cleansing. There were no statistically significant reductions in other satisfaction levels.

- 75** The service's track record in recycling had been slow up until April 2005. There was little progress to improve recycling levels from 12 per cent in the preceding two years and the Council does not compost any household waste. However, recent figures show that the current performance has increased in the last year and the unaudited figure diverted for recycling and composting in 2005/06 is 30.2 per cent. Half of this is the result of the transfer of waste to an anaerobic treatment plant contributing to composted amounts. Increased recycling can be attributed to direct initiatives such as bin stickers, the publication of policies in the local media and the subsequent implementation of such policies as closed bin lids and refusal of side waste.
- 76** There have been significant improvements in horticultural services, for example in cemeteries where hedge planting and maintenance improvements combined with health and safety assessments have improved access for people with disabilities and encouraged wildlife.
- 77** The service has made effective use of resources in some areas of the service. However the service currently lacks a consistent approach and strong track record in managing value for money. To address the gaps, a template for internal service level agreements is currently being developed and the Council is introducing a peer challenge approach which is being piloted in environmental services. Financial regulations and a new scheme of purchasing delegation were reviewed in May 2005 and the Council has included elements in the corporate organisational development programme, which are designed to contribute to development of corporate value for money criteria.

### **How well does the service manage performance?**

- 78** Overall the service is well placed to continue delivering environmental improvement. It acts effectively as an environmental leader and plans are in place to tackle most areas of weakness within the service. However, underdeveloped targets to measure outcomes at the corporate and community strategy level and incomplete links from top to bottom in the performance management framework mean that the service is not currently able to fully demonstrate its contribution to the Council's overall aims.
- 79** The joint municipal waste management strategy has been reviewed during 2005 to take account of changes in the regulatory environment for waste management and the implementation of new technology and recycling services in the county. A new draft waste management plan sets out nine policies which provide the framework for delivering the objectives of the new strategy. It is focused on waste minimisation and reducing amounts to landfill by delivering national targets through treatment plants for waste to be composted. The new joint strategy aims for 20 per cent recycling and composting by 2008, 30 per cent by 2010 and 33 per cent by 2015. These targets are not challenging when considering the current performance, though the 2010 target may be increased to 40 per cent by the government.

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- 80 The links from the community strategy to the corporate plan to improve the environment and the customer's quality of experience are clear. The service has worked hard to drive improvements which contribute to the corporate priorities of:
- customer excellence by providing accessible, responsive services, including engaging customers in developing service standards;
  - working in partnership with local residents and community groups and parish councils to deliver the Community Strategy to contribute to an attractive, protected environment;
  - neighbourhood management by leading the Council approach in joined up service delivery; and
  - maximising efficiencies by developing partnerships which provide greater value for money in service delivery.
- 81 The service is also improving its arrangements to address anti-social behaviour by formalising its already improved approach; an enforcement policy for anti-social behaviour is being developed.
- 82 However most of the targets for actions underpinning the Community Strategy's objective 'to manage the natural environment in a sustainable way' are not specific or measurable and there are similar weaknesses in some corporate objectives. The service has challenging aims for continuous improvement of the environment but strategies and policies have not been brought together to give a clear message to residents on what the service is delivering or is able to deliver. There are also some gaps in target setting at service level. Some service aims are supported by clear targets such as to increase the biodiversity of the district and there is clear intent to improve customer focused services through the new environment customer service standards and plans to roll out neighbourhood management. However the draft Waste Management Plan and the Sustainable Environment Policy do not have clearly set targets. The service is addressing these gaps in its plans and local performance indicators are currently being drafted. The Council is currently consulting the community on draft local indicators for equalities and diversity.
- 83 Corporate and political support for environmental services and senior management within the service is strong. Councillors demonstrate their knowledge and commitment to environmental improvement and are responsive to community feedback.
- 84 A culture of performance improvement is developing well within the service. The corporate 'one team' approach is motivating staff, who are open to change and innovation and are clear what is expected of them. Performance is discussed regularly at team meetings and latest monthly performance figures are displayed on staff room notice boards. Staff at different levels of the service are involved in corporate improvement initiatives such as Action Learning Sets which, although relatively new, aim to identify solutions for areas for improvement and there is an obvious enthusiasm by staff to contribute to these initiatives.



- 85** The Council has a performance management framework in place, but the system to support it is not fully implemented. However, the service is able to report monthly BVPI performance on an individual team basis and local PI performance on an exception basis. Training and further developments are planned to improve the use of the performance management system to monitor and manage performance and related outcomes.
- 86** The Council has slipped on its corporate target to establish systems to ensure value for money in each service, which was due to be complete by December 2005. The service is working towards demonstration of value for money in several areas but procurement processes and asset management within the service are still underdeveloped.
- 87** The use of benchmarking is limited. The service makes good use of benchmarking with its APSE family group and this has shown that it compares favourably for cost and performance but the Council is not using broader and more challenging comparisons of cost and quality.
- 88** The service is proactive in learning through networking with high performing providers before introducing new systems or working practices such as its integrated IT system to manage service requests and complaints. It also uses customer feedback within the service to inform future delivery, but customer feedback is not currently shared corporately thus missing the opportunity to improve learning opportunities.
- 89** Scrutiny is becoming more effective in its work to deliver improved outcomes for users. Examples include reduced cases of arson following the bonfire policy which banned unauthorised fires and the improvements in cemeteries. The Council is seeking to increase scrutiny effectiveness in areas such as challenging the budgeting process to drive service improvements and deliver value for money through a councillor development programme.

### **Does the service have the capacity to improve?**

- 90** Environmental services now have access to significant skills, tools and finances to deliver future improvements for residents of Chester-Le-Street. There are also significant corporately led investment plans at varying stages of development which are designed to strengthen the service's contribution to delivering against corporate and community priorities.
- 91** The service has increased capacity through both corporate and service based initiatives. HR policies and procedures are modern and are becoming effective. The Organisational Development Programme which includes a leadership programme for all leaders, managers, supervisors and a staff development programme which includes project management, performance management and equalities and diversity training, has taken place across the authority. Staff delivering the service demonstrate the benefit of such training through their attitude and approach to service delivery, for example, by the service's positive response to customer complaints about the introduction of waste minimisation policies.

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- 92 Sickness levels within the service are comparatively high. The Council is seeking to address this through a corporate programme of sickness absence management training and initiatives such as phasing in return to work to support staff. As a result sickness levels are now reducing.
- 93 The service has also increased its capacity to deliver a more strategic approach to delivering environmental services through additional resources. It has added posts for policy and strategy development and performance management. Service teams have developed specialised skills for example in enforcement, waste recycling and arboreal training. Training to develop existing skills in anticipation of some of the workforce taking retirement is also underway through a ground care apprentice programme and HGV driver training.
- 94 Managers and councillors are beginning to disinvest in non-priorities and restrict growth items to priority areas. This has been demonstrated by additional funding of £78,000 for environmental services, funded from procurement and efficiency savings. These funds have been used to increase the workforce and improve street cleansing working practices. However, the exercise to fully prioritise all base budgets has not yet been carried out.
- 95 The service is starting to use IT more effectively to deliver service objectives and improvements. The Council has recently invested in improved IT systems such as for Customer Relationship Management to improve the way in which visitors and callers are dealt with and new software to improve the service's ability to respond to customer insurance claims. The service has also invested in electronic mapping systems and a recently procured management system which have already improved the service's capacity to respond quickly to customer requests such as missed bins or bulky waste collections. Further development of these systems aims to improve service delivery and performance management.
- 96 The service has been successful in attracting external funding for bulky waste handling and recycling, although the latter has not yet had an impact on the service. An appointed consultant has recommended actions to improve communications to drive improvement in recycling and waste minimisation areas which will be discussed with the joint waste strategy partners. It has also made a recent bid to the Crime & Safety partnership for a mobile CCTV camera to assist in identifying offenders. There are also plans to extend the schools environment education programme to adults and to pilot the Council's approach at the County Council's Adult Learning Week in May 2006.
- 97 The corporate drive to address equality and diversity issues aims to result in improvements for service users. The Council has recently developed a Corporate Equalities Plan which is at an early stage of implementation but includes an impact analysis and self assessment leading towards the achievement of level 2 of the Equalities Standard for Local Government by March 2006. The impact analysis within the service is to be used to address any gaps in service delivery for those at risk of exclusion.

- 98** The Council has been slow to address weaknesses in procurement but it has recently entered into a partnership arrangement with Derwentside Council to boost its capacity and expertise in procurement. The aim of the arrangement is the implementation of a robust procurement strategy that will maximise efficiencies and deliver savings across all services.
- 99** There are other areas that have still to be fully addressed but have the potential to increase the service's capacity to improve. These include the following.
- The revision of the corporate communications strategy and action plan which is out of date. This, alongside developments to improve customer understanding through improved IT, action learning sets and the Council's Knowledge management Group, should enable the service determine an improved approach to capturing feedback from customers and non customers.
  - A process mapping project due to start in March 2006 will give the service (which is the first pilot) the opportunity to make full use of the Customer Relationship Management system when it goes live and help to deliver better front line service to customers.
  - Development of arrangements to cater for the accommodation needs of the service and future replacement of the service's fleet of vehicles.