

Progress assessment report

March 2006



Progress Assessment Report

Chester-Le-Street District Council

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Progress assessments

In 2002, Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) was introduced at single tier and county Councils (ST&CCs) and at district Councils in 2003/04, as a way of supporting Councils to deliver improvements in services to local people. CPA brought together existing information on service performance in Councils with a corporate assessment of each Council's ability to improve. This was used to reach an overall conclusion about whether a Council was 'excellent', 'good', 'fair', 'weak' or 'poor'.

Councils have prepared improvement plans following CPA and those Councils classified as 'under performing' have received annual progress assessments by the Audit Commission. Those cases giving most cause for concern have also been the subject of formal engagement by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM). Through its network of relationship managers, the Commission worked closely with lead officials assigned by the ODPM in developing an appropriate monitoring programme.

Audit Commission progress assessment work has sought to measure the impact and sustainability of improvement activity. The progress assessment work has been tailored to local circumstances to provide appropriate public assurance and to contribute to improvement reporting. It involved an evidence-based judgement on progress against the original corporate assessment criteria, but without producing a score.

The progress assessment is part of the Commission's commitment to helping Councils ensure continuous improvement to services for local people. It does this in the context of its strategic regulation principles, which look to minimise the burden of regulation at the same time as maximising its impact. We are committed to working in partnership with other regulators and the ODPM in this aim.

Introduction

- 1 In March 2004, the Audit Commission published a CPA category for Chester le Street District Council. This assessment categorised the Council as 'poor'. The key strengths and weaknesses from the corporate assessment are set out in Appendix 1.
- 2 The CPA inspection (carried out in autumn 2003) found that the Council had no clear ambitions or plans and that it suffered from poor leadership and decision making. It carried out only limited consultation with local people and although it provided some good services it had significant weaknesses in others and did not focus on service improvement.
- 3 Our Progress Assessment in 2004 reported that Chester le Street District Council had begun to make progress to tackle the weaknesses identified in CPA but was at an early stage in its recovery. It was making some progress on its first Improvement and Recovery Plan. Consultation and engagement with local communities was being improved, and better internal communications were helping to involve staff in the council's recovery activities. Internal processes such as performance and risk management were being developed. National performance indicators showed a mixed picture of service performance.
- 4 This report presents an analysis of the Council's progress to date based on the Council's implementation of its improvement and recovery plan and comparison with the baseline position of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment.

Summary

- 5 Chester-le-Street District Council is progressing well in addressing the weaknesses identified in the CPA inspection in 2003 and in our Progress Assessment published in December 2004.
- 6 During 2005 the Council set out its ambitions for the district clearly in its new Corporate Plan and strengthened its strategic planning and performance management framework significantly. Senior politicians and managers are providing good leadership both internally and externally; the Council is working with the Local Strategic Partnership to update the Community Strategy. The Council is making progress on new strategies and plans including community engagement, equality and information management.
- 7 The Council has made good progress in developing and implementing its plans for improvement, in line with its Improvement and Recovery Plan. In doing so it is addressing many of the weaknesses identified in CPA. It has improved its capacity through the appointment of a good senior management team, and is developing its councillors and staff.
- 8 The performance of the Council's services remains mixed but is improving overall. There have been significant improvements in the planning service, in the revenues and benefits service and in e-government. The Council is progressing regeneration projects and improving access to its services. However, the housing service continues to face significant challenges.
- 9 The Council is developing its plans for the future, with a number of strategies in place including a three-year corporate plan and medium term financial strategy. It is developing a culture of improvement and is beginning to learn from others.

Recommendations

- 10 It is recommended that the Council:
- actively and promptly shares the findings of this progress assessment with staff;
 - takes it to an appropriate public committee meeting; and
 - uses the key findings as the basis for revising the recovery plan in conjunction with any direction from the Monitoring Board, (if one exists).

Context

The locality

- 11 Chester-le-Street is one of the smallest districts within County Durham, with a population of 54,000. It covers 66 square kilometres and is a mix of urban and rural areas. The town has a mainline railway station, is close to the A1 and has good transport links.
- 12 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.
- 13 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.
- 14 There is relatively stable demand for affordable housing in the area. This is changing with a growing population, in line with the regional average. Forecasts indicate that by 2006 there will be a significant increase in the over 65 age group which has implications for housing provision.

The Council

- 15 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.
- 16 The Council employs 577 staff and manages a gross budget of about £50 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, the Assistant Chief Executive and the Head of Organisational Development, was appointed. Services are now structured in three Directorates, Corporate Resources, Development and Community Services; the Assistant Chief Executive and Head of Organisational Development lead the improvement process and change programme.
- 17 Following CPA 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.

What is the Council trying to achieve?

- 18 Chester le Street District Council has made good progress in setting out its ambitions for the district and in supporting these ambitions with clear implementation plans. It is working with the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) to provide much improved community leadership.
- 19 The Council is now taking a lead role in the LSP. The Community Strategy, published March 2004, articulates a shared vision based on a strong, sustainable and diverse economic base in the district, inclusive communities, excellent communication networks, and an attractive and protected environment. The Council is supporting the LSP to update the strategy to produce clearer, more measurable short (one-year) and medium (four-year) action plans.
- 20 The Council agreed a new Corporate Plan in May 2005, setting out a new vision and seven new priorities for the Council. These provide an explicit customer focus and underpin the Council's contribution to the Community Strategy. The Plan contains some outcome targets but these are not comprehensive across all services and priority areas.
- 21 The vision and priorities were developed in consultation with partners and local people. The Council's approach to consultation is improving. While it does not have a consistent or co-ordinated approach to consultation and engagement and it does not have sufficient information to enable it to fully understand the needs of local communities, it is developing a community engagement strategy. It improved its engagement with local communities during 2005 by undertaking a resident's survey, establishing a tenants' panel and compact and carrying out some user focus groups.
- 22 Political and managerial leadership is now good. The Leader, Deputy Leader and new Chief Executive have over the last year demonstrated active and effective leadership. Councillors have grown in their roles and continue to be engaged, committed and enthusiastic. The Council now has a strong corporate management team and working relationships between senior officers and councillors are good.
- 23 A cohesive corporate culture and clarity on what the Council is trying to achieve is evident at councillor and senior management level. This focus has not yet fully permeated the organisation. The Council has implemented a number of new processes to improve focus, such as a forward planner, decision tracker and standard format for Council agendas and reports. The Chief Executive in particular is developing a culture of accountability. Internal communications have improved and the Council has made good use of the 'One Team' branding introduced by the Chief Executive.

How has the Council set about delivering its priorities?

- 24 The Council has made good progress in developing and strengthening its corporate processes and its ability to improve services. It has worked hard to develop strategic planning and to establish robust management processes. Most of the essential components to support improvement are now in place, although they are not being consistently applied. The corporate culture is changing to one which is supportive of change and there are high expectations for delivery and accountability.
- 25 The Council revised its Improvement and Recovery Plan (IRP) during 2005 and this now provides a good focus for improvements to the way the Council works. Four themes continue to guide these improvements: vision into action, decision making, people and performance and improving services. The Council made good progress during 2005 in delivering the detailed action plan for the IRP. Some elements have not progressed at the pace originally intended, but the Council is clear about the reasons for this and has taken appropriate action in response.
- 26 The Council has made progress on councillor development and has improved its scrutiny function. A new constitution was approved in May 2005, together with revised financial regulations and schemes of delegation. These are already enabling the Council to make decisions more quickly, for example in relation to planning. The quality of decision making and reports to councillors, although still variable, has generally improved.
- 27 The performance management framework is greatly improved now that the Corporate Plan is in place, and the Council has put a good performance management system in place. There are still some weaknesses: links between the Council and LSP frameworks are not well developed, not all elements of the Corporate Plan have measurable outcome targets, and a culture of performance management is not fully embedded. The Council issued new guidance in late 2005 to improve the quality of service plans.
- 28 Data collection and presentation of information to support performance management is improving. New performance management software is being used by officers. A pilot project is developing performance reports in a form which is useful for councillors and the Council now reports performance quarterly on its website.
- 29 The Service Improvement Team, established in 2004 to focus on service quality and performance, has not been active but there are indications that better performance management is beginning to drive improvement, particularly in planning and e-government. The Council is now implementing a programme of support to service improvement.

- 30 Financial management has improved. The Council implemented a new financial management system during 2005; this produces more useable and more regular reports for budget holders. It has improved its budget setting processes, and has developed a medium term financial plan to direct its resources more effectively towards what it is trying to achieve. However, there are still weaknesses in financial management; in particular, effective links have not been made between financial planning processes, performance management, value for money and the Gershon efficiency agenda.
- 31 An organisational development programme, designed to help staff deliver the new agenda, is being rolled out, together with a corporate training strategy. HR policies and procedures have been modernised and new tools have been developed. A corporate training plan is in place and consultants are delivering an organisational development programme. The Council is reviewing its policies and procedures for addressing high sickness absence after sickness levels, which fell in 2004/05, rose during the first half of 2005/06. It has made limited progress in implementing single status, which it now plans to complete by September 2006.
- 32 Risk management processes now compare well with neighbouring authorities. Project management is improving, but remains inconsistent. There has been mixed success in gaining skills and knowledge from the use of external consultants, although this has been particularly successful in risk management. There has been limited progress on strategic procurement; the Council is addressing this by establishing a joint procurement unit with Derwentside District Council.
- 33 Work on equalities and diversity is progressing well but is not fully embedded. The Council has produced its first Equalities Action Plan and is in the early stages of developing a dialogue with some disadvantaged groups. The Leader and Assistant Chief Executive are champions in this area and are driving a recently established working group which has been charged with mainstreaming equalities and diversity issues.
- 34 Service users are becoming involved in developing service standards and the Council is developing customer service standards in consultation with a user focus group. It has developed and promoted a user friendly comments, compliments and complaints system, and now regularly analyses feedback.
- 35 The Council has made rapid progress on ICT and e-government during the past year and now performs well on these. In 2004/05 the Council's percentage of types of interaction with the public (as measured by BVPI 157) was in the bottom quartile compared to other councils. The Council has now achieved 100 per cent performance on BVPI 157 and the latest (December 2005) local and central government website report shows significant improvement in overall ranking: it is now within the top 25 per cent of websites for accessibility and performance.
- 36 The Council has further developed and strengthened partnership working, including some joint service provision with neighbouring local authorities, regeneration projects in partnership with the private sector and good links with the voluntary sector.

What has the Council achieved/not achieved to date?

- 37 Improvement in the Council's services and against its priorities has been mixed.
- 38 Overall, based on key performance indicators (PIs) for 2004/05, 59 per cent of PIs were above the average compared to all councils, with 39 per cent in the top quartile. Forty-nine per cent of key PIs (performance indicators covering the core areas of service) improved over the three years from 2002/03. However, the Council failed to meet its own targets for 54 per cent of indicators, and in these cases nearly two thirds were deteriorating rather than improving.
- 39 During the first half of 2005/06 there have been some significant improvements on some indicators, including most of those which were worst quartile at the time of CPA. Areas of good performance and significant improvement include planning, benefits and electronic service delivery. The Council's own customer satisfaction survey indicates that levels of satisfaction increased by 3 per cent in each of the last two years.
- 40 We summarise below the Council's main achievements against the three main aims which were in place until May 2005, with a separate section on the housing service. Comparisons are with all councils based on national performance indicator data for 2004/05, the latest year for which audited information is available.
- 41 **To sustain and promote health, safety and wellbeing of the District with particular emphasis on developing inclusive communities.**
- The Council has made progress on key regeneration projects. These include Drum Industrial Estate, Bowes Business Park, Pelton Fell, Mechanics Institute, and Chester le Street town centre. A significant amount of additional funding is supporting further regeneration projects.
 - The Council has helped to improve the health of the district through the Lifestyle Initiative which has been awarded the ILAM Health and Physical Activity Recognition award. As a result of this initiative almost 20,000 local residents have taken part in the Gym Based Referral Programme, the Footsteps to Fitness Walking Programme and the Lifestyle Exercise classes.
 - The Council continues to perform poorly against BVPI 156 (the percentage of authority buildings open to the public in which all public areas are suitable for, and accessible to, disabled people). Progress since 2002/03 has been very limited. Until very recently there was no clear corporate drive to ensure that capital works were prioritised and targeted to improve disabled access. This is now being addressed through a project managed approach, driven through the equality and diversity working group, chaired by the Assistant Chief Executive as Equalities and Diversity Champion. The second quarter indicator this year has shown a slight improvement to 14.8 per cent.

42 To develop strong communities by enabling and enhancing the opportunities for all people in the District.

- Progress has been made on sport, leisure and arts development, with the construction of the Riverside Training Centre, the refurbishment of the gym at Chester-le-Street leisure centre to ensure disabled access, and attracting additional funding from the Arts Council and the Government for the role of arts across Council services.
- In 2004/05, the Council met government targets for dealing with minor and other planning applications, and was in the top quartile of performance. Performance on standard search times has improved but is not meeting the Council's target. Action has been taken to try to improve the Council's record on the number of appeals succeeding. The Council now scores maximum points on the Pendleton scores for electronically accessible planning.
- The speed of processing of benefit claims has improved significantly, from 46 days in 2003/04 to 30 days in 2004/05, this was better than the national average and further improvements since then have reduced this to 23 days; at the same time the Council has improved the percentage of cases processed correctly.
- The Council has taken steps to improve access to services by developing a Customer Relationship Strategy, enabling on-line payments to be made via the Council web-site and creating a single point reception at the Civic Centre.

43 To protect enhance and promote the environment of the District and, in doing so, contribute towards the protection of the national and global environment.

- The Council has been nationally recognised for its biodiversity work. It has been awarded the International Green Apple Award, and has also received a Silver Award at the Royal Horticultural Society Tatton Show. The Riverside area has retained its Green Flag award.
- The cost of waste collection per household has reduced and the recycling rate improved slightly from 11.76 per cent to 12.54 per cent in 2004/05; however, recycling was still lowest quartile performance. The Council has implemented a number of initiatives including a recycling scheme for schools and shoe banks at recycling sites. All residents in the district are now served by a kerbside collection of recyclables.
- The Council improved its score against the environmental health checklist but remained in the bottom quartile of performance in 2004/05; there has been some improvement during 2005/06.

Housing

- 44** The Council's housing service has suffered from significant weaknesses for some years. In 2001-2002 we referred the service to the Secretary of State following two inspections which found the service to be 'poor'. The Council has a detailed action plan in place to address the weaknesses. We will inspect the service again in May 2006 to assess progress.

14 Progress Assessment Report | What has the Council achieved/not achieved to date?

- 45** In 2004/05, half of housing PIs were in the top quartile and half were improving, but the proportion of the Council's houses which did not meet the Decent Homes Standard was high and the average SAP (energy efficiency) rating was below the median level. The stock condition survey 2005 indicates that 53 per cent of housing stock does not meet the Decent Homes Standard.
- 46** The housing service continues to face significant challenges, as demonstrated by the 'mock inspection'¹ in 2005. This found some improvements, including in customer focus, housing strategy, partnership working and arrears recovery, but continuing weaknesses including tenant access and engagement, diversity, delivery of the capital programme, gas servicing, allocation systems and some aspects of value for money.
- 47** The Council plans a large scale voluntary transfer of its housing stock to provide investment for the achievement of the Decent Homes Standard.

¹ The Council commissioned a review of its housing service which was carried out using Audit Commission housing service inspection methodology. This 'mock inspection' was carried out by a private consultancy during the summer of 2005. A formal Audit Commission inspection of the service will take place in May 2006.

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

- 48 The Council has made some progress in setting out its plans for the future, through the new Corporate Plan and other plans and strategies. The Corporate Plan extends to 2008 and the Council has not set out a longer term vision for the district. The Council will align its own plans with those of the LSP when the revised Community Strategy is finalised during 2006.
- 49 A number of plans and strategies are now in place to guide and support future activity, but the strategic framework is not yet fully complete. Some key strategies including regeneration and information management are still in development. IRP2 is more externally focussed than IRP1, emphasising community participation and access to services, and a pilot scheme for neighbourhood management is underway. The Council is at an early stage in identifying the aspirations and needs of all local communities for participation and access.
- 50 The Council is managing the improvement and recovery process well and its approach to monitoring the progress of improvement projects is helping it to learn from these. A staff suggestions scheme is well established and there are opportunities for staff at all levels within the organisation to contribute to corporate initiatives. The Council is encouraging a culture which values contributions from all parts of the organisation. Volunteer 'Inspirers' are working alongside managers in action learning projects.
- 51 The Council does not systematically learn from others, for example by comparing costs and service quality through benchmarking exercises and service reviews, but it has started to be more willing to learn from others. It participates in a number of county-wide initiatives and has taken the first steps to develop joint service provision with neighbouring authorities.
- 52 The Council is actively considering alternative ways to provide its service. It is considering the transfer of its housing stock to a housing association, and is in the early stages of an options appraisal for leisure services. It is using learning from the options appraisal for housing to help inform the leisure review.
- 53 A two-year Customer Excellence Strategy has been developed and a number of initiatives are underway to help the Council better provide good customer care, meet access needs, and improve efficiency.

Appendix 1 – Summary of theme scores and strengths/weaknesses as reported in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment in March 2004

Table 1

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Ambition	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft community strategy in place but progress has been slow • Personal drive and ambition displayed by the political leadership • Growing recognition and political ownership of the problems facing the Council 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No clear long term vision or ambitions for the area • Corporate plan out of date • Lack of outcomes or meaningful targets which relate to local people • Poor leadership at senior management level
Prioritisation	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some early work in developing political priorities, next year, four years and ten years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Priority setting has been weak in the past • Limited consultation with local people to help inform priorities • Slow progress in addressing diversity issues • Communication is mixed • Resources are not matched to priorities

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Focus	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing Advisory Board established to ensure a stronger focus on housing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little evidence to demonstrate that the Council has stayed focused • Lack of significant improvement in housing • Lack of performance management framework to help the Council stay focussed • Inability to manage business effectively
Capacity	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change in political leadership following the elections in may 2003 – enthusiastic and eager for change • Some good examples of partnership working • Some committed and motivated staff and managers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant capacity issues – Corporate Management Team • Quality and effectiveness of decision making and Council meetings are generally poor • Roles are not clearly defined • Historically, HR practices have been weak • No strategic focus on procurement • Lack of an ICT strategy • HRA has been poorly managed

18 Progress Assessment Report | Appendix 1 – Summary of theme scores and strengths/weaknesses as reported in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment in March 2004

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Performance management	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New corporate performance management system being implemented with the help of consultants • Housing have made recent improvements – individual plans for staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council acknowledges PM is weak • Strategic and service planning is underdeveloped • There is no culture of performance management • Performance monitoring is poor • Management of staff is patchy • BVPP qualified each year • Risk management strategy is poor. Help sought from consultants
Achievement	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relatively high overall public satisfaction with services but particular issues in housing and benefits • Key achievements noted in improving community safety 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant number of PIs in bottom quartile • Achievements not related to service planning, design and delivery • Poor assessment for benefits service • Housing service zero-star inspection – resulted in government intervention • Mixed performance in waste management – kerb side collection but missed targets for recycling

Progress Assessment Report | Appendix 1 – Summary of theme scores and strengths/weaknesses as reported in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment in March 2004 **19**

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Achievement of improvement	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance data for 2002/03 indicates improvement • Improvements in the areas of community safety, environment and housing benefits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ad hoc improvements for young people • Some progress made in housing but much more to do • Track record in performance is mixed • Lack of significant improvements in economic regeneration
Investment	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corporate management strengthened by interim chief executive • Early progress in developing performance management framework • More responsive to external challenge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council is investing from a low base but recent attempts to put in place new strategies • Risk management is poor • Scrutiny is underdeveloped • Lack of a medium term financial strategy
Learning	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased self awareness and ownership of the problems over the last six months – the focus is on moving ahead rather than reflecting on the past • Housing Advisory Board is a good example of support from outside • Council is actively seeking out help from others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is no systematic learning or evaluation • Limited track record of learning and service delivery • Many staff are not encouraged to take initiative – exceptions include community safety, housing strategy work and consultation • Council is not proactive in maximising the impact of the Board

20 Progress Assessment Report | Appendix 1 – Summary of theme scores and strengths/weaknesses as reported in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment in March 2004

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Future plans	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality of statutory plans improving but from a low base • Community strategy due to be completed by December 2003 • Homelessness strategy now in place – an important initiative • Sound future plans for public space issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic planning is weak • Service planning is variable • Council recognises the need to address corporate issues but lack of detailed future direction • Housing – lack of a business plan • Housing – strategy not yet fit for purpose but progress being made

Scoring key:

1 - Weak

2 - Weaknesses outweigh strengths

3 - Strengths outweigh weaknesses

4 - Strong

Appendix 2 – Progress monitoring against the findings of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment

- 54 The original comprehensive performance assessment was carried out under the Local Government Act 1999 and published in March 2004.
- 55 Under section 3 of the Local Government Act 1999 ('the Act'), best value authorities have a duty to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the exercise of their functions, having regard to the principles of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. By virtue of sections 10 and 13 of the Act the Audit Commission may carry out inspection activity to ensure that a best value authority is complying with this duty, and may issue a report as to its findings. This progress monitoring activity and reporting to assess improvement falls within sections 3, 10 and 13.
- 56 The main elements of this progress monitoring report were collation and analysis of evidence from:
- self-assessments of progress made, completed by the Council;
 - appointed auditor evidence from performance and financial audit activity;
 - audited performance indicators, inspection reports and plan assessments;
 - reviews of key corporate documents including performance reports, committee papers and management reports; and
 - interviews with managers and councillors' staff.
- 57 This progress monitoring report for Chester le Street District Council was collated by the Audit Commission and reflects evidence gathered over the period from November 2005 to January 2006.
- 58 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 reporting progress to any Monitoring Board and updating and improving the Recovery and Improvement Plan as appropriate.