

Progress Assessment Report

December 2005



Progress Assessment

West Somerset District Council

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Progress assessments

In 2002, Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) was introduced at single tier and county councils 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'.

Those councils classified as 'poorly performing'¹, were the subject of formal engagement by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), and were required to produce an improvement plan following their CPA. Through its network of relationship managers, the Commission worked closely with the lead officials assigned by the ODPM in developing an appropriate monitoring programme for the improvement plan.

This progress assessment will measure the impact and sustainability of the Council's improvement activity. Where necessary, it will report on regress. The progress assessment is tailored to local circumstances, provides appropriate public assurance and contributes to improvement reporting. It will report an evidence-based judgement on progress against the original corporate assessment criteria, but it will not give 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.

¹ 'Poorly performing' is defined as councils that were classified as 'poor' or 'weak' with a corporate assessment score of 1

Introduction

- 1 In September 2004, the Audit Commission published a Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) of West Somerset District Council. This assessment categorised the Council as 'weak'. The key strengths and weaknesses from this assessment are set out in Appendix 1.
- 2 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

- 3 West Somerset District Council is making reasonable progress in addressing the weaknesses identified in the previous CPA report.
- 4 The Council is delivering improved results for local people. It is improving the quality of life for its residents by effectively focusing on reducing homelessness, increasing the supply of affordable housing, expanding recycling and creating safer communities. Overall council satisfaction is high and in 2004/05 the Council increased satisfaction in important areas of service delivery. Areas of poor performance noted in the CPA report have improved including planning and benefits. Access to services for the community is now easier and being driven by clearer aims which place the customer more at the heart of the Council's activity.
- 5 After a slow start following CPA the pace of change has quickened. The Council is now putting in place the right building blocks to deliver cultural change and modernisation. This is being supported by a focus on the Council's new medium-term vision known as Destination 06. This vision is pointing the Council's capacity and investment in the right areas in support of its aim to becoming a modern local authority.
- 6 Political and managerial leadership is improving. The Council is generally more aware of the need to improve and learning has been strengthened, especially among the corporate management team and team leaders. The Council has continued to plan for the future through stronger forward plans and these are supported by staff and partners.
- 7 However, important weaknesses remain. Performance management is progressing slowly and is still underdeveloped in key areas such as risk management and service planning. Stronger financial management arrangements have not been secured to match capacity with all the Council's medium-term aims.
- 8 Not all councillors own or drive the improvement agenda or consistently articulate a community-wide vision. This is affecting the Council's ability to modernise and sustain its district-wide community leadership role. The Council's approach to strategic external communication remains weak and this is affecting public relations.

Recommendations

- 9 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 any current or future plans.

Context

The locality

- 10 In the one year since its Corporate Performance Assessment (CPA), West Somerset's context has not significantly changed. However, the district continues to face a number of important challenges.
- 11 West Somerset is a very sparsely populated district in the county of Somerset in the south west of England. The district covers 725 square kilometres, two-thirds of which is within the Exmoor National Park. The main settlements are Minehead, Williton, Watchet and Dulverton. The population of the district is 35,900 with half of the population living within the coastal strip. The population increases by 1.8 million day visitors. The rest of the population is scattered across the rural area.
- 12 Tourism and agriculture are the district's two main employment sectors with a high incidence of seasonal employment and low paid part-time jobs. In addition, the district has significant levels of deprivation and is ranked as the 81st most deprived in England and Wales. West Somerset is a popular retirement and second holiday homes destination and the cost and availability of housing when compared to incomes is a major influence on prosperity and employment opportunities. Access into and within the area is poor and there are no rail links into the district. The two main road routes servicing the area have limited capacity and there is a constant need for improved public transport within the district.

The Council

- 13 The Council is Conservative controlled with 18 out of 31 councillors. There are currently 2 Liberal Democrat councillors, 2 Labour and 9 independent councillors. The Council adopted the cabinet and leader model of governance in 2001, and still has a geographically balanced cabinet chaired by the Leader with eight portfolio holders, seven of whom are Conservative and one of whom is an Independent.
- 14 The Council employs 122 staff. The latest restructuring took place during 2005 which created a corporate management team (CMT) of four, including the Chief Executive and Deputy Chief Executive, and two corporate directors. There are 13 team leaders responsible for services and a 'virtual' unit responsible for implementing community-based projects. The Council has a £4.3 million revenue budget and an ambitious capital programme for 2005/06 of £3.7 million.

- 15 Since CPA in 2004 the Council has embarked on a modernisation process called Destination '06, which integrates the Council's CPA improvement plan and key elements of the corporate plan. This aims to put in place the building blocks that will create strong performance improvement. The improvement plan contains five main strands namely: leading the change; leadership of the community; complete customer satisfaction; efficient resource management; and people and organisation. There is an action plan for each strand.

What is the Council trying to achieve?

- 16 The Council has clarified its aims and has improved its approach to prioritisation to help focus on what matters to local people. However, not all councillors embrace a clear district-wide vision and the Council's strategic approach to external communication remains weak.
- 17 West Somerset's long-term ambitions to 2020 remain relevant and the Council is demonstrating increased leadership and commitment to the local strategic partnership (LSP). The Council has been actively engaged in a review of the LSP and this has improved the potential to ensure that cross-cutting themes including access, regeneration, community safety and services for older and younger people are tackled effectively. The LSP now has clearer plans and priorities, and better co-ordination exists with the Council. Partners support the Council's developing role and stronger links with the LSP. This is placing the Council in a better position to exploit any opportunities from closer links with the emerging local area agreements between public bodies in Somerset.
- 18 A new and clearer medium-term vision is driving the activity of the Council. Senior managers demonstrate a better understanding of how this will be achieved and have recognised the need for significant cultural change. The Council now has clearer ambitions that are based on a planned and actively managed improvement journey to be a modern local authority. Termed 'Destination 06' and containing five strands including clear community leadership and complete customer satisfaction, the Council has put in place many of the building blocks for success. These are supported by clear implementation plans which are driving an improved sense of direction, commitment and focus. Internal communication has improved resulting in more motivation to provide better services.
- 19 Clearer community, service and organisational priorities guide the work of the Council. This is an important improvement since the initial CPA assessment. The three most important community priorities for more jobs, increased pay and better affordable housing reflect the needs of local people. This has guided increased capacity, investment and delivery in these areas. A clearer focus on improving poorly performing services exists and the Council can demonstrate improved capacity and delivery in areas such as customer access, benefits and planning.
- 20 However, not all councillors consistently own or drive a district-wide vision or have a clear understanding of their broader community leadership role. Ownership and a commitment to Destination 06 and the need for corporate improvement is mixed. In addition, the identification of lesser or non-priorities remains incomplete and this is not being driven by councillors. This is slowing the pace of change.

- 21 There remains a lack of a strategic approach to consultation and communication. The Council is not maximising the opportunities that exist from its various consultation and communication exercises with service users and customers. Despite good customer satisfaction, the Council has poor media relations. This has been clearly seen in local reporting of the Council's difficulties in securing centralised offices. As a result, the Council has a relatively poor public image.

How has the Council set about delivering its priorities?

- 22 Weaknesses in performance management remain and financial management remain. However, political and senior managerial leadership has improved and the Council has increased its ability to deliver on its priorities.
- 23 The Council has not secured stronger financial management arrangements in support of all of its ambitions. The medium-term financial plan is only updated annually, and councillors do not receive revenue and capital budget monitoring reports on a regular and timely basis. The Council has plans to fund its ambitious capital programme through sales of under-utilised assets, but longer-term revenue spending plans are unclear. As a consequence, it is unclear how the Council will manage any future budgetary pressures.
- 24 Despite improvements in the performance management framework, significant weaknesses remain. No corporate plan exists and service plans do not contain SMART targets. Councillors are not sufficiently involved in managing performance and the role of scrutiny remains underdeveloped. The performance management system is still not integrated with service planning and is underdeveloped in key areas including risk management and project management. These weaknesses are limiting the Council's ability to ensure that improvements are affordable or sustainable in the longer-term.
- 25 The Council is demonstrating more active management at political, senior managerial and team leader level. The corporate management team is more cohesive and joint working with team leaders is improving delivery. Management development programmes have made a significant impact on increasing confidence and competency among managers and team leaders. Staff sickness absence is low and reducing. Staff morale is increasing from a low point in 2004.
- 26 More active management has created opportunities to re-focus capacity on priority areas. Underperforming services such as IT, building control, and licensing have received increased capacity and this has resulted in service improvements. In addition the Council has also increased staff capacity in community safety, homelessness and recycling which are priority areas. This is placing the Council in a better position to drive improvement.
- 27 The Council has increased its capacity in the right areas to help deliver its priorities. Operational partnerships continue to increase capacity in priority areas such as waste management, street cleansing and recycling. This is reflected in increased public satisfaction in these areas. External funding has been used to improve capacity through staff training, developing senior managers and multi-skilling key staff. The LSP has used £102,000 of funding from taxing second homes to increase its resources including employing a full-time co-ordinator.

What has the Council achieved/not achieved to date?

- 28 Good progress has been made by the Council in addressing previous areas of weakness. Service delivery in waste has improved and more affordable houses are available to local people. The pace of change has recently quickened and investment is stronger. However, there is lack of clarity in measuring value for money.
- 29 The Council's service delivery in priority service areas is improving. Good progress is being made in housing. Effective partnership working with neighbouring councils and housing associations has resulted in home loan schemes, fewer vacant homes, reduced homelessness, and investment in land to deliver a higher number of more affordable homes. The Council met its recycling targets in 2004/05 and has reduced the amount of waste collected. Overall crime is low and reducing, and the Council is making better progress with its crime and disorder reduction strategy. The Council has also improved poorly performing services such as planning which now has good satisfaction and improved performance in dealing with new homes built on previously developed sites and with minor and other planning applications. This matches the best 25 per cent of councils.
- 30 The Council is making good progress with its five strands of its corporate improvement plan known as Destination '06. Progress with the first strand of the plan labelled 'leading the change' includes effective management development programmes. The essential building blocks are being put in place to achieve a better performance management system. These include a more robust staff competency system with clear guidance and training on how to deliver appraisals. Performance reports to councillors are clearer and more frequent, and a new scrutiny committee structure has been introduced separating performance and policy committees. This places the Council in a better position to drive improvement.
- 31 West Somerset is making good progress with its 'community leadership' objectives. Examples include investment in the LSP, joint funding to four new Sure Start community buildings and support to ARTlife, which is effectively targeting and delivering art outreach activity to vulnerable groups, young people, the elderly and to people in rural locations. Despite considerable budgetary pressures, the Council has also decided to maintain its support to its leisure facilities and community transport schemes. The number of concessionary scheme passes has increased significantly, and overall participation in leisure centres is increasing. Most significantly, participation by disabled users, the elderly and young swimmers has increased since 2004. In addition, investment in electronic government is improving access from rural areas.

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

- 32 Good progress is being made with the Council's 'complete customer satisfaction' strand of its corporate improvement plan. Overall council satisfaction is high, and in 2004/05 the Council improved satisfaction with waste collection, cleanliness, benefits services and recycling, all of which match the best 25 per cent of councils nationally. The Council is investing in internal reviews and has carried out customer surveys of its contact centre, reviewed how people access services, and has agreed a number of new corporate service standards which it intends to integrate into its new service plans in January 2005.
- 33 The Council has made significant investment in its staff and using external funding to improve skills and capacity. This is addressing the Council's fifth strand of its corporate improvement plan which relates to 'people and organisation'.
- 34 Some progress is being made with the fourth strand known as 'efficient resource management'. Satisfaction with handing of complaints is low and has not improved. Procurement remains underdeveloped and makes the scope for efficiency savings less likely. Work has commenced on identifying lesser priorities but this work is not complete, and there is a lack of clarity in demonstrating value for money. Services such as leisure and grounds maintenance have been market tested but most have not. The impact of external regeneration funding is also unclear. As a result, the Council lacks many internal systems and processes that can effectively measure the impact of increased investment.

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

- 35 The Council has strengthened its learning and has developed stronger plans. However, some future plans in key areas remain underdeveloped.
- 36 Recognition of the need for significant improvement is now driving improvement throughout the organisation. Self-awareness and ownership of the need to improve is much stronger among senior managers and staff, the Council leader and some portfolio holders. Importantly, the Council has avoided the temptation to go for quick fix solutions built around changes to a few internal processes. As a result, the Council is putting in place strong building blocks for sustained performance improvement. While these changes are in their infancy they demonstrate a clearer commitment to improvement which has been recognised by staff and partners.
- 37 Learning throughout the Council is improving, driven by a significant investment in training and development. Senior managers, team leaders and frontline staff have benefited from training in areas such as managing performance, building high performance teams, leadership training and personal coaching. The 'guiding team' that drives forward the implementation of Destination 06 provides more structured opportunities for managers to share learning. Clear plans and resources exist for improvement in the capacity of all councillors and for better understanding of becoming a modern local authority. This is placing the Council in a better position to deliver Destination 06.
- 38 The Council is more aware of its weaknesses and is starting to tackle these more effectively. The Council continues to benefit from internal reviews, self-assessment, visits to other councils and learning from experience. For example the Council shows early signs of benefiting from visits to high performing councils to learn how to address a poor corporate performance and image. This is resulting in greater self-awareness and confidence.
- 39 The Council has many clear plans to support its ambitions. Examples include a more robust housing strategy and plans for recycling, customer access, and the crime and disorder reduction partnership (CDRP). Comprehensive plans to review the LSP provide the potential to guide partnership working to more effectively in order to deliver its vision for more balanced communities. The Council also has plans to improve weaker areas including risk and performance management, and is increasing investment in councillor training based on personal development plans.

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

- 40** However, there are a number of areas where the Council's plans to deliver its ambitions and priorities remain underdeveloped. The Council has not integrated service and financial planning with Destination 06. As a consequence, there is a lack of clarity on medium-term financial planning. The Council is not clear that it has sufficient medium-term capacity to deliver an ambitious balanced community programme.
- 41** Future plans are also not prioritised and less clear for consultation, access, youth and economic development. Training and development opportunities for councillors are only now being addressed despite a clear need to increase expertise and build capacity. The Council is aware of these issues but without clear plans that show how the Council is matching its capacity with its aims, there is a risk that future improvement will not be sustainable.

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

Table 1

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Ambition	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear long-term vision linked to community plan. • Corporate plan identifies two corporate aims. • Aims supported by clear objectives. • Based on a good understanding of local community need and context. • Good examples of community leadership. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Under developed programme for the implementation of Intention 2.
Prioritisation	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consultation used to guide setting of corporate priorities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of clarity of the relative priority of two corporate objectives. • Community not engaged in the setting of relative priorities. • Underdeveloped understanding and mainstreaming cross-cutting themes.
Focus	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant progress with some long-term difficult decisions. • Some mechanisms for retaining focus. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Portfolios not consistently supporting council's new direction.

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

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Capacity	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnerships used to increase frontline service capacity. • Able, committed and flexible staff. • Innovative use of finances. • Use of mixed economy for delivery of services. • Upgraded ICT to support smarter working. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal capacity limits service improvement and delivery. • Limited financial capacity not matched to ambitious agenda. • Roles and responsibilities for councillors and managers not clear. • Quality and level of decision-making. • Staff skills and development needs not identified or matching ambitions. • Inconsistent application of HR policies.
Performance management	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some monitoring of performance in some services. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weak performance management. • Weak risk management. • Incomplete staff appraisals. • Poor use of performance information to guide decision-making. • Lack of awareness of value for money. • Dated/inconsistent service standards. • Weak target setting linked to priorities.

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

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Achievement	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 54 per cent of PIs in top two quartiles. • Met government B&B target. • High satisfaction with refuse collection and recycling. • Good provision of supervised activities for young people. • High-quality public open space. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low satisfaction with some key services. • Some services under-performing. • Poor access to council services. • Opportunities to improve public safety is not embedded in frontline delivery. • Unsupervised activities for young people.
Achievement of improvement	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some services are improving. • Food inspection targets met through partnership working. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of significant improvement in delivery of balanced housing market. • Lacks of improvement in access.
Investment	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investing in customer contact services. • Developing systems to generate capacity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key weaknesses not fully addressed, eg PM, risk, scrutiny, prioritisation. • Some key building blocks not being developed. • Pace of change is slow.
Learning	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-aware of challenges facing the Council. • Examples of learning from other councils. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning not shared across council or between services. • Customer feedback is under developed to support learning.

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

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Future plans	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some strategic plans in place. • Consultation and engagement with local people and stakeholders supports plan development. • Plans are reviewed in the light of national and regional priorities. • Plans to develop processes to support service improvement. • MTFP identifies short-term financial need for Intention 1. • Intention 1 strategy and Unit 5 service plan for capital programme. • Clear plans to develop youth facilities in Minehead. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some plans not current or up-to-date. • Older plans do not contain SMART targets. • Plans to deliver Intention 2 not clear.

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

- 42** The original Comprehensive Performance Assessment was carried out under the Local Government Act 1999 and published in 2003/4.
- 43** 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.
- 44** 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
 - observations, interviews and focus groups with managers, staff, councillors, customers and partner organisations.
- 45** This progress monitoring report for West Somerset District Council was collated by the Audit Commission and reflects evidence gathered over the period from April 2004 to October 2005.
- 46** 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 and updating and improving corporate plans or strategies as appropriate.