

Inspection report

November 2003



# **Comprehensive performance assessment**

**South Norfolk District Council**

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## Introduction

- 1 Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) is part of the wider agenda set out in the Local Government White Paper *Strong Local Leadership – Quality Public Services*. The White Paper encourages greater focus on improved services for local people by freeing good councils from central government controls and restrictions, and providing poorer councils with more, and better focused, support for improvement. CPA is the first step in this process, that of making an overall judgement of where each council stands.
- 2 This report presents an analysis of the council's overall performance as well as two short diagnostic assessments which cover important areas of responsibility. It also includes an assessment of the council's benefit service by the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate, and the appointed auditor's assessment of performance on each of the main elements of the code of audit practice. The appendices to this report set out further details on the findings of these assessments and the framework for CPA.

## Summary of Comprehensive Performance Assessment judgements

- 3 South Norfolk Council is a good council which has a good basis to deliver more improvement.
- 4 It has over the past two years put in place most of the necessary building blocks to achieve continuous improvement in services. It provides some good services and works well with local partners.. The recent enhancements in its capacity and new ways of working have not yet, however, led to a clear trend of improvement across all of its services.
- 5 The council has worked well with its partners, using a comprehensive community planning process, to develop a shared vision and overall priorities. The original community plan programme for action is updated and monitored by the local strategic partnership (LSP). The council's own objectives flow directly from the community plan. The community plan priorities and council objectives are very broad and the council has not explicitly prioritised within its objectives. However, the council is clear internally about relative priorities and these are reflected in the allocation of resources.
- 6 In the last two years, the council has implemented many significant changes to its ways of working. A new management structure was implemented in April 2003 to create capacity for strategic management. It has worked to improve performance management through the South Norfolk improvement process (SNIP) and this is starting to have an impact on service improvement. The council has invested in its approaches to risk management, project management and procurement. Although progress has now been made to implement these, they are not yet all fully embedded.
- 7 Both officers and members are very open to internal and external challenge. As a result, the council learns effectively from its own experiences and those of others.
- 8 Service performance is mixed, with good performance in some areas (including recycling and crime) but performance in housing has deteriorated at a time when management resources have been focused on preparations for the proposed large-scale voluntary transfer (LSVT), which was agreed by tenants in July 2003.
- 9 Overall, public satisfaction for the council and most of its services is high, but satisfaction with leisure facilities is low. Significant improvements have been achieved in the priority area of rural sustainability, including economic diversification, drainage and town and village enhancements. Another priority area showing significant improvement is recycling.
- 10 The council's future plans are soundly based in the current community plan, and the council has innovative plans for updating this alongside development of the new local plan. Future plans do not, however, consistently include clear, long-term targets.

## Summary of assessment scores

Top level question	Theme	Grade	Weighted score
What is the council trying to achieve?	Ambition	3	3
	Prioritisation	3	3
	Focus	3	3
How has the council set about delivering its priorities?	Capacity	3	3
	Performance management	3	3
What has the council achieved/not achieved to date?	Achievement in quality of service	3	9
	Achievement of improvement	2	6
	Investment	3	6
In light of what the council has learned to date, what does it plan to do next?	Learning	4	4
	Future plans	3	3
<b>Weighted score</b>			<b>43</b>
<b>Corporate assessment category</b>			<b>Good</b>

Space for spider diagram to be inserted showing the 10 themes

South Norfolk Council scored well in most of the areas assessed, with learning identified as a particular strength.

## Recommendations

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

## Context

### The locality

- 12 South Norfolk is a predominantly rural area with a population of 110,700. The main settlements are the towns of Diss, Harleston and Wymondham and the fringes of the city of Norwich. Most of the district is, however, very sparsely populated.
- 13 The district overall is low in the ranking for deprivation (291 out of 354 districts) but there are pockets of deprivation. The rural nature of the district also means that rural isolation and accessibility are key socio-economic issues. High house prices mean that provision of affordable housing is a significant challenge.
- 14 The major employment sectors are retail, health and manufacturing, with over 50 per cent of the district's working population travelling to Norwich. Although the district has few major tourist attractions, tourism is a significant part of the local economy, with 2.7 million day visits per year.

### The council

- 15 The council comprises 28 liberal democrat and 18 conservative councillors and has been under liberal democrat control since 1995. It has operated a cabinet and scrutiny model since September 2000, in advance of the legislative requirement. The scrutiny committee is supplemented by policy development panels, which have a good level of representation from partner organisations.
- 16 A new officer structure was implemented in April 2003, replacing the previous departmental structure with one in which there is a strategic management team comprising the chief executive and two corporate directors. Ten service heads are responsible for operational management.
- 17 The council is based in the village of Long Stratton, which lies close to the geographical centre of the district but is some distance from the main centres of population which lie close to its borders.
- 18 At the time of the inspection, council tenants were voting on a proposed large scale voluntary transfer (LSVT) of the housing stock. The vote concluded with a substantial majority of tenants voting in favour of transfer.

## What is the council trying to achieve?

### Ambition

- 19 Strengths in the council's ambitions outweigh weaknesses.
- 20 The council's ambitions are rooted in a well established community planning process. The first community plan was published in November 2000, earlier than in most authorities, and followed extensive work with partner organisations and consultation with the public. The vision sets out the following ambitions:
- ◆ a place where local people take the central role in making decisions about their community and its development, and the public services they receive are excellent;
  - ◆ a healthier and even safer place to live, where the 'fear of crime' is low;
  - ◆ a place where older, young and vulnerable people get the very best care;
  - ◆ an area of high educational achievement and lifelong ready access to learning and culture;
  - ◆ a place where the environment is protected and respected, high quality housing is available to all and it is easier to travel around using varied forms of transport; and
  - ◆ an area with a diverse rural economy and a first choice for innovative businesses to set up and grow.
- 21 The vision has been translated into six themes, which form the basis of cabinet portfolios. The themes in turn form the basis of the council's own objectives, ensuring that the council objectives are rooted in the community plan.
- 22 The community plan and council objectives are not specific about some of the outcomes the council and its partners are seeking to achieve in the medium and longer term. The plan and objectives list the actions which will be taken. While some of these actions include intended outcomes, others do not and specific targets are not given for many of the outcomes. There are, however, specific targets given for many of the actions further down the council's performance management hierarchy, in the community plan programme for action and the council's own service plans. What is lacking in some cases is clarity about the longer term outcomes and targets. There are important exceptions, however, such as the council's ambition to bring and keep all council housing to a good standard for the next thirty years.
- 23 There is a thorough and effective process of monitoring and updating of the community plan by the local strategic partnership (LSP). Formal monitoring reports are compiled twice per year, resulting in a programme for action each year. The process of monitoring is well organised and generally effective though not always complete. For example, there is no commentary in the action plans on the targets which have not been achieved. The updates do, in most cases, give targets and milestones for the year and in some cases for longer periods, but these are not always specific. For example, in the 2002/3 programme for action,

a target for action is 'Widen Leisure Passports and improve health fitness checks for older children in care'. Specific targets do, however, exist for this action further down the performance management hierarchy. Some of the targets are also to undertake further planning and review work rather than specific actions. As a result, the council and its partners are less effective in measuring the impact of their work in these areas.

- 24 The council's ambitions in relation to diversity are developed into action planning, demonstrating a commitment to equality in employment and service delivery. As well as issues such as race and disability, the council sees diversity in a wider sense in terms of, for example, rurality and access to services. Diversity is thus reflected in its overall ambitions with, for example, the council objectives including 'we will act to improve equality of opportunity and promote social inclusion'.
- 25 The council gives attention to sustainable development by evaluation of economic, environmental and social factors in its plans as demonstrated in the use of section 106 agreements in villages developments, for example in Tivetshall.
- 26 The council has demonstrated good community leadership both through its work with the LSP, in which it continues to provide an appropriate level of leadership despite no longer holding the chair, and through the way it has taken a clear lead on a number of issues including:
  - ◆ Work to overcome the disadvantages of rurality, setting out clear ambitions which cut across all the community plan themes, and translating these into actions with partners.
  - ◆ Leading the tenants clearly towards the LSVT once it became apparent that, despite the political unease, this was the best option.
  - ◆ On a smaller scale, taking a lead in dealing with flooding issues although it had little direct interest in the issue as service provider or landowner.
- 27 Leadership within the council is strong. The leader, chief executive and corporate management team demonstrate a commitment to community cohesion, working with partners, and a corporate approach. The council is well regarded by partner organisations.

## **Prioritisation**

- 28 Strengths in prioritisation outweigh weaknesses.
- 29 The council has carried out some significant shifts of resources to meet its priorities. Revenue resources totalling £1.6 million have been reallocated between 2000/01 and 2003/04. An example of this is the allocation of £322,000 to recycling. The main priorities for capital expenditure are IT, reflecting the priority on e-government, and housing.
- 30 The council has a good basis for the broad priorities which it has set, as a result of extensive community consultation, engagement with partners and research in areas such as socio-economic trends. In addition to the original community planning process the council consults with the public annually as part of the budget-setting process and the council takes this information into account in both

the overall level of council tax and determination of spending priorities. This consultation can affect choices. For example, as a result of public views, additional resources have been allocated to kerb side collection of recyclables.

- 31 The community plan themes and council objectives are well understood by partners and staff. Partners are aware of the themes because of the extent of their participation in deriving them and in updating the community plan. The performance management system ensures that the themes and objectives feed down to individuals through team planning and the appraisal process. The council has ensured communication of priorities to staff through a range of mechanisms including learning hours, mouse mats, a poster campaign and the staff newsletter 'Inner Link'.
- 32 Council objectives lack explicit prioritisation. The community plan themes and council objectives are very broad and there are few of the council's activities which do not fall within the community plan themes and council objectives.
- 33 The council is, however, clearly operating an implicit system of prioritisation which is linked to budget decisions. Areas identified as particular priorities include:
- ◆ Access to services and facilities.
  - ◆ Sustainable rural economy.
  - ◆ Affordable housing.
  - ◆ E-government.
  - ◆ Recycling.
- 34 These areas all appear within the community plan themes and council objectives, but are not explicitly identified within them as particular priorities. They are, however, reflected in the council's spending patterns and plans, and in service developments. The council has in the past devoted resources to supporting the rural economy (e.g. through the village shops scheme), access to facilities (e.g. community transport), affordable housing (sustained focus on use of both housing association and section 106 agreements), e-government (current development of IT facilities) and recycling (roll-out of kerbside recycling).

## Focus

- 35 Strengths in the council's focus outweigh weaknesses.
- 36 The council has demonstrated an ability to focus on priority issues over time. Examples include:
- ◆ The sustained focus on improving performance in the benefits service since this was identified as an issue two years ago. As a result, performance has improved significantly with, for example, the average time for processing new claims improving from 89 days in 2001/2 to 46 days in 2002/3.

- ◆ The focus on the outcome of the 2001 best value review of housing, which led in turn to the proposals for large scale voluntary transfer of the housing stock.
- ◆ Continuing focus on the provision of affordable housing. As a result, for the ten year period 1992/1993 to 2001/2, a total of 521 affordable homes were constructed, representing 11.8 per cent of all house building.
- ◆ Clear attention to securing the sustainability of villages and village life. Actions have included helping village shops to remain open, and enabling the provision of new community halls.

37 However, housing performance deteriorated as a result of the focus on the LSVT.

38 The council's structures and processes help it to maintain focus on priorities. Member and senior officer meetings are well managed, with clear agendas and focused discussion. Minutes are clear and there is clear follow through of actions and monitoring of this through successive meetings. Cabinet decisions are clearly communicated through the organisation using a specific report format. This also summarises the actions, taken and outstanding, relating to all cabinet decisions from the previous six months.

39 There is effective forward planning of cabinet business, with a standing item on the agenda of each meeting to review the plans for future business. In addition, each cabinet meeting is followed by a further less formal, but still effectively minuted, meeting to consider emerging issues, such as options for the future provision of leisure. The recently-developed quarterly performance monitoring arrangements provide a clear link to allow cabinet to focus on areas of poor performance.

40 The work of the council's scrutiny committee and policy development panels has maintained an appropriate focus on high-profile areas whilst also dealing with ad hoc issues. The focus has covered both community related issues, national priorities, such as energy efficiency, and key issues regarding the running of the council, including the management restructuring and the procurement best value review.

41 Cabinet portfolio responsibilities are aligned to the community plan themes, helping to ensure a focus on these. The creation of the corporate director posts within the new officer structure has also provided an opportunity for focus for officers on the overall themes rather than on service areas. It is too early to assess the effectiveness of this.

## How has the council set about delivering its priorities?

### Capacity

- 42 The council has increased its capacity in the past two years and as a result strengths outweigh weaknesses.
- 43 Councillors are able and committed and there is an extensive programme of member training. Members of the cabinet have a good understanding of the issues they are discussing, not confined to their own portfolios. The council adopted a cabinet and scrutiny model in advance of the legislative requirement. The opposition and ruling groups operate together in a constructive way and this has led to the development of an effective scrutiny function. One example of effective working between the groups occurred during the inspection in relation to the tourism strategy. The strategy was heavily criticised in a council meeting, and the portfolio holder then invited the relevant opposition members to make comments after the meeting. These comments were then considered constructively during the next cabinet meeting.
- 44 Relationships between members and officers are good, with effective input from officers at member meetings and robust challenge of officers by members. The leader and chief executive provide effective strategic leadership. The new ethical framework for officers and members is understood and is operating effectively. A standards committee has been established and has appropriate membership, with three district council members, two parish members and two independent. All district council members have signed up to the new member code of conduct.
- 45 Staff morale is good and the council has investors in people (IIP) accreditation. The council also has in place an annual overall officer training plan, but there is no clear longer term approach. The overall management development programme has recommenced, having been suspended while training resources were concentrated on the new appraisal system. The council is also undertaking an innovative approach to address recruitment and retention issues in the benefits service. The council has participated, in partnership with other Norfolk district councils, in a programme funded by the department for works and pensions to train people for 6 months to undertake benefit assessment work and so ensure future development of skilled staff across Norfolk. The sickness absence rate has remained at around 10 days per full-time equivalent employee for the last three years, in the second best quartile for all councils, and the council is seeking improvements through investing in occupational health.
- 46 A new officer structure was implemented from April 2003 to increase capacity for strategic management. The structural review was well considered and sought to address three key issues: the need for a more corporate culture, to improve performance management arrangements and to improve corporate governance. Although it is too early to judge its effectiveness, the structure is well thought through and achieves a clear separation between operational and strategic management.
- 47 The council makes good use of partnerships to deliver services. The council was one of the first to jointly fund (with the primary care trust) a health improvement officer post. The council has entered into partnerships with neighbouring authorities for the delivery of internal audit, with building control to follow. The

council has worked closely with neighbouring Mid-Suffolk District Council in procuring and implementing its new revenues and benefits computer system. Relationships with the County Council are good in most areas, and the council has a good record of working with parish councils. Approximately 73 per cent of parish councils surveyed considered the council priorities to be clear, and approximately 64 per cent considered that they were consulted about the priorities. The relationship between the council and its key partners has resulted in increased capacity to meet key priorities. For example, a sports centre is to be developed at Framingham Earl High school as a result of a partnership between the District and County Council, with South Norfolk funding £365,000 capital, and Norfolk County funding the additional £600,000 through the new opportunities fund.

- 48 Use of the private sector to enhance capacity is variable. Previous best value inspections found a mixed picture, with a thorough market testing and contracting process in environmental services but a failure to consider options for use of the private sector in revenues and some elements of leisure.
- 49 The council's IT provision is under-developed. Deficiencies in computer systems have hampered effective management in the housing service and, until recently, have hindered effective budgetary control.
- 50 The council has adequate levels of reserves, with general fund reserves on 31 March 2003 at 40 per cent of 2002/03 net revenue expenditure.

## **Performance management**

- 51 The council has put in place effective performance management arrangements and strengths outweigh weaknesses.
- 52 The South Norfolk improvement process (SNIP) was implemented from September 2002 and set out the hierarchy of performance management from the community plan through to individual appraisals and actions. It therefore takes the objectives of the South Norfolk alliance, translates these into council objectives which then feed down through service planning and team planning to individuals. Most elements of this structure are working well, both at the high level (community plan and council objectives) and lower levels (team planning and appraisals). The arrangements are well-resourced with a small team of performance review officers who work with service managers and portfolio holders to manage performance.
- 53 The regular performance monitoring is leading to actions to tackle areas of declining performance. For example, monitoring of performance indicators for development control identified a decline in performance during 2002/03. As a result, resources were identified for additional staff, partly from the planning delivery grant, and changes were made to procedures. More recently, the council has begun to take action as a result of poor performance in dealing with homelessness applications and in prompt payment of invoices.
- 54 The council has been closely monitoring the performance of the housing service for several years, and particularly during the preparations for LSVT. Regular performance monitoring meetings have involved senior managers and the portfolio holder and actions have been taken in response to declining

performance in areas such as voids and day-to-day repairs. However, success has been mixed, with clear improvements in some areas but not in others.

- 55 The council's approach to risk management is not yet fully integrated into service planning. Progress has been made on risk management, following a relatively late start (June 2002), with a risk management strategy adopted in February 2003. This set out processes for managing risk and identified risk categories, distinguishing between strategic risks and service risks. These are now in operation and a review of progress was reported to cabinet in July 2003. Until integration with service planning is achieved, service risks may not be reviewed systematically and risk management is not part of day-to-day decision-making.
- 56 Budgetary control arrangements are sound overall and have improved with the installation of a new computer system which offers much improved accessibility and flexibility.

## What has the council achieved / not achieved to date?

### Achievement in quality of service

- 57 Strengths outweigh weaknesses in the quality of services provided. The council delivers some good services, evidenced by performance indicators and inspections, and has delivered significant outcomes on the ground.
- 58 Performance in relation to safeguarding the environment community plan theme is generally strong. The best value inspection of environmental health was rated as good. Of the environment and planning indicators within the council's basket of 23 key performance indicators, four allow for comparison with other councils and reveal that two are in the top quartile and two in the second. Customer satisfaction with services is generally high. Performance in 2001/02 is in the top 25 per cent for satisfaction with recycling facilities, the standards of cleanliness and the percentage of planning applicants satisfied with the service received and in the second best performing for satisfaction with waste collection.
- 59 Performance in relation to the 'economy' theme is good. Various initiatives have helped to strengthen and diversify the rural economy. These have included pragmatic planning decisions which have enabled small-scale industry to be maintained in a rural setting. The council has also provided grants to local shops to further maintain the economy and sustainability of rural life. The network of small towns which form the framework for the rural communities has also been supported in a variety of ways. Further initiatives have helped maintain the sustainability of rural settlements. These include contributions to village halls and provision of a new village green. The best value inspection of economic development was rated as 'good'.
- 60 In line with the community plan theme better health and safer communities, the council and its partners can demonstrate very strong performance in community safety measures. Analysis of the results of 6 performance indicators relating to crime figures demonstrates that crime rates were low in 2001/02. The crime rates for domestic burglaries, robberies, theft of and from motor vehicles, violence against the person and sexual offences all demonstrate performance within the best performing 25 per cent of all councils. The only exception to this strong performance was in the percentage of racial incidents that resulted in further

action, which at 25 per cent, in the worst performing 25 per cent for 2001/02. However, performance is currently close to 100 per cent. Analysis of unaudited data for 2002/03 reveals that 92 per cent of residents feel safe during the day, 67 per cent feel safe at night.

- 61 Performance in relation to the community plan theme care, fairness and housing is more mixed. When compared to other councils, performance in 2001/02 for the council's own basket of 6 housing performance indicators revealed four indicators in the second best performing group of councils, one in the third and one in the worst performing 25 per cent. Despite generally high levels of tenant satisfaction, tenants have concerns over the management of repairs and the appointments system.
- 62 Affordable housing is a key priority for the council. 521 affordable homes have been created in the ten year period from 1992/3 to 2001/2, with 11.8 per cent of all housing completions classified as affordable.
- 63 Performance in equality measures is also mixed with the percentage of council buildings with disabled access at 33per cent in 2001/2, in the second best performing group. The percentage of staff with disabilities as a ratio of people in the working age population with a disability was at 15per cent, in the second worst performing group, and the percentage of women in senior posts at 17per cent was in the worst performing 25 per cent.
- 64 The South Norfolk partnership development fund, a small grant scheme in partnership with other organisations, has helped develop new health and care initiatives with real outcomes for local people such as a toy library for children with learning difficulties, an information centre in Diss to serve people with visual impairments and a mobile provision of youth services, with a van that visits isolated parishes to take youth services out into the community.
- 65 Performance in relationship to the community plan theme of culture and learning is not strong. The best value inspection of the leisure service was rated as fair. The performance indicators for satisfaction with sports halls, parks and open spaces and theatres and concert halls were in the worst performing 25 per cent. However, since these indicators were last updated, the council has made significant improvements to leisure facilities. Success has been achieved in the theme with the council helping to facilitate new learning centres in Wymondham and Diss.
- 66 In relation to the council priority to provide quality value for money services, service performance in 2001/02 is in the best quartile for the collection of council tax, non-domestic rates and the percentage of invoices paid on time.
- 67 Benefit processing figures were in the worst performing 25 per cent in 2001/02. The Benefits Fraud Inspectorate has rated the council as providing a fair standard of service (Appendix 4), taking account of more recent improvements in processing times. They identified a number of strengths but also commented on the need for further improvement in processing times and working arrangements. The best value inspection for the revenues service was rated as good.
- 68 Overall citizen satisfaction with the council's services was 70 per cent when last measured in 2000/01, placing it in the second best performing quartile.

- 69 The overall picture of BVPIs (best value performance indicators) for 2001/2, the most recent year for which full comparisons are available, show that the council had 28 per cent of the key indicators in the top performing 25 per cent, 21 per cent in the second best performing, 23 per cent in the third and 28 per cent in the worst.
- 70 The council has four chartermarks, some of which have recently been renewed, for individual services: revenues, refuse collection and recycling, pest control and sheltered housing.

## Achievement of improvement

- 71 Despite some notable improvements in local facilities, there is no clear overall trend of improvement in the council's services, and weaknesses outweigh strengths.
- 72 In relation to the council objective to provide quality value for money service, the council's performance indicators show some improvement. Overall, BVPI data shows that, for those key BVPIs where comparative information is available, 25 per cent improved in 2001/2 and 75 per cent did not improve. In 2002/03, 37 per cent of comparable indicators improved, but there was also significant decline with 45 per cent of indicators deteriorating.
- 73 There have been significant improvements in benefits processing. Turnaround time for new benefit claims and changes of circumstances was in the worst quartile in 2001/2, but as a result of sustained effort by the council the time taken to process new claims and changes in circumstances halved in 2002/3 putting performance in the second (2001/02) quartile.
- 74 Performance in relation to the community plan theme care, fairness and housing is mixed. Performance in housing performance indicators generally deteriorated over a three year period from 2000/01 to 2002/3. There are indications of recent improved performance in some areas following council action, but others (particularly day-to-day repairs) are not yet improving although backlogs are being eroded.
- 75 Performance improvement in equality measures is encouraging. The percentage of council buildings accessible to disabled people has increased from 33 per cent in 2000/01 to 50 per cent in 2002/3. The percentage of employees from minority ethnic communities increased from 1.5 per cent in 2001/2, to 2.4 per cent in 2002/3.
- 76 Performance improvement in relation to safeguarding the environment community plan theme is generally strong. Recycling rates, which represent a key national and local priority, have improved from 11.3 per cent in 2000/01 to 15.3 per cent in 2002/3. As a result of the commencement of rollout of kerbside recycling, the council expects to meet the statutory target of 20 per cent by 2003/4. Significant improvement has been achieved in recent years with the extension of rural transport schemes such as the Borderhoppa. The council has also achieved improvements which are visible to the people of South Norfolk, such as the town centre improvements in Harleston.

- 77 Planning performance has deteriorated over a three year period. The percentage of applications determined within eight weeks fell from 74 per cent in 2000/01 to 69 per cent in 2001/02, and to 65 per cent in 2002/03. The council has now taken steps to rectify this and early signs are encouraging.
- 78 There is promising performance improvement in relation to the community plan theme of culture and learning. The council has secured major improvements in its leisure facilities, which are recognised by users, from the refurbishment of the Diss swim and fitness centre.
- 79 The council has a good track record of providing for the needs of young people. An additional youth worker has been half financed by the council. Consultations with young people have led to a number of improvements including skate parks at Mulbarton, Diss and Hempnall. External funding has been achieved and opportunities for young people are increasing.
- 80 Under the better health and safer communities theme, the 6 crime measures demonstrate mixed improvement. Theft of and from motor vehicles reveals performance to have improved in both measures by 7 per cent when the year 2000/01 is compared to 2001/02. Vehicle crimes generally have increased from 7.6 per 1,000 population in 2000/1 to 8.71 in 2002/3. Domestic burglary rates per 1,000 households were static at 6.2 in 2000/01 and 2001/02 and rose to 7.9 in 2002/3, but remain in the best performing 25 per cent.

## **Investment**

- 81 The council has put many of the necessary building blocks for service improvement in place and strengths outweigh weaknesses.
- 82 The efforts which the council has made to progress LSVT represent a significant investment in the future of the housing service. Although initially reluctant, once the council became convinced that LSVT was the best option, it has driven it hard as the best way of securing service improvement.
- 83 The council has done well to secure external funding to help deliver its priorities. Because of its deprivation ranking, South Norfolk is not an area which is likely to attract significant external funding. However, part of the district is now covered by the LEADER+ initiative. Under this scheme, a total of £3 million, including £1.35 million from Europe and £300,000 from DEFRA, is being spent in South Norfolk and neighbouring Waveney DC on various schemes to increase jobs, rural services and skills in the Southern Broads area. The council has also obtained significant funding in relation to leisure centres (£1.6 million), communities and learning and business centres.
- 84 The council has recently implemented comprehensive new corporate project management arrangements. It is too early to assess fully the effectiveness of the new arrangements. However, there are encouraging signs, with the new arrangements considering key project management requirements including risk management. Prior to the new arrangements, the council had an approach to project management which had been piloted with IT projects and rolled out through the management development programme, but which was less comprehensive in terms of the types of projects to which it was applied.

- 85 The council is undertaking significant investment to improve the IT infrastructure, with resourcing of £3 million planned over the next three years to improve IT provision throughout the council. This is intended to improve the internal management of the council and allow improved public access to services. One particular development is the NLIS/LAMP project, a system that the council has piloted which brings together land and property systems to enable improved performance in areas such as land charges, planning and environmental health.

Other examples include:

- ◆ new revenues system in partnership with Mid-Suffolk District Council;
  - ◆ IT facilities for parish councils; and
  - ◆ a partnership with the University of East Anglia in connection with waste management. This partnership has allowed for the effective evaluation of new technology use on a pilot recycling project, with micro-chipped wheelie bins providing key data.
- 86 The council has been slow to develop a strategic approach to procurement. As a result of the deficiencies it identified in its procurement strategy, it is currently undertaking a best value review of procurement. This is focusing mainly on arrangements for purchasing of goods and services. The council has in the past lacked information on its purchasing patterns, partly as a result of IT deficiencies, and obtaining and analysing such data is a large part of the review. The review is also intended, however, to address the strategic approach to procurement, including decisions on whether services should be provided in house or with partners from private or public sector. Key issues from the review to date include the recognition that a co-ordinated and more strategic approach to procurement is necessary to promote the council's corporate objectives.
- 87 The council has unsophisticated medium term financial planning arrangements in place. The plan provides a clear statement of future financial plans, but does not explicitly identify links from the council's priorities.
- 88 The council is open to external challenge from other organisations and the public. It participated in the Improvement and Development Agency's (IDeA's) local government improvement programme, and took prompt action on the findings. It also responded constructively to the findings of the peer challenge to its self-assessment carried out as part of the CPA process. The council has a methodical approach to responding to the findings from best value inspections and external audit work, resulting in a high level of implementation. Policy development panels include representatives from outside agencies and the scrutiny committee seeks input from outside the council. The council has also opened itself to external scrutiny through IIP and the chartermark scheme.
- 89 Standing orders include a facility for direct public challenge in meetings of the council, cabinet and planning committees and this facility is well used.
- 90 The council also has sound arrangements for internal challenge through an increasingly effective scrutiny function and thorough best value reviews. There is one scrutiny committee, chaired by an opposition member, with links to policy development panels which carry out the policy development aspect of the overview and scrutiny role. Debates in scrutiny committee are lively and result in

effective challenge to the work of the cabinet, whether through call-in or other ongoing scrutiny work.

- 91 The improving trend in scorings in best value inspections indicates an improvement in the review process. The most recent full inspection, of environmental health (July 2002), found a good service with promising prospects for improvement. Earlier reviews found less promising prospects and as a result, the council has undertaken improvement action to develop performance management arrangements. This has included clarifying and communicating priorities and objectives for staff as this was found to be a common theme of best value review findings. The 2001 best value review of the strategic housing service, which has not been formally inspected, was a thorough process which has resulted in significant actions including the proposed LSVT. Current reviews in areas such as procurement are also thorough, with effective scrutiny involvement in the process.

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

### Learning

- 92 The council's approach to learning is strong and has few limitations.
- 93 The council is self aware and has learned from its past mistakes and experience. It has been effective in implementing the learning from the IDeA improvement programme. Key changes made as a result of IDeA recommendations include translation of the community plan themes into council objectives, improving the scrutiny function and introducing an overall approach to project management.
- 94 Project management is also the clearest example of the council learning from its mistakes. A number of capital projects, and particularly the Diss swimming pool, were poorly managed and this led to a clear recognition among senior officers and members that a corporate approach to project management was needed. The cabinet report which set out the new arrangements listed eleven issues arising from past experience and highlights the reasons for past problems.
- 95 The council's self-assessment demonstrates a good level of self-awareness, with many of the strengths and weaknesses which we have identified already outlined in the self-assessment.
- 96 Other major changes which the council has made in the light of its previous experiences include:
- ◆ SNIP, which built on the council's previous experiences of performance management when staff were confused because there was no clear hierarchy for managing performance;
  - ◆ development of the scrutiny function, where the council learned particularly from its initial overemphasis on call-in; and
  - ◆ the new management structure, which was based partly on an honest assessment of the council's weaknesses in performance management and review.
- 97 The council has been active in learning from the experience of other organisations. Although there is no overall framework within which this learning takes place, its extent and frequency clearly indicates that the council is open to learning at all levels. Examples include visits to other authorities to observe and discuss LSVT, recycling, benchmarking exercises in revenues and benefits, and active participation in professional networks.
- 98 These methods have led to real changes within the council and, in the case of LSVT, have helped the council avoid some of the problems encountered by others. One important lesson has been the need for good working relationships to be fostered between the shadow registered social landlord and the council's own strategic housing team. Visits to other authorities have enabled the council

to implement its kerbside recycling scheme with few teething troubles, as the council learned from mistakes made by others.

- 99 The council has an innovative approach to ensuring that learning is transferred within the organisation, Weekly learning hours are held, open to all staff. Recent topics for these events have included updates on the LSVT process, explanation of the 2003/4 budget, the LEADER+ initiative and stress awareness. Learning hours have also been used to communicate corporate objectives and community plan priorities, and the results of staff focus groups generally demonstrate good staff knowledge of these.

## **Future plans**

- 100 The council has an innovative approach to revisiting the community plan and local plan, and strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area.
- 101 The council's future plans flow from the community plan and are therefore well-rooted in an extensive consultation process. This is supplemented by the annual budget consultation, which has resulted in adjustments to plans, and by working with partners on the annual community plan programmes for action.
- 102 The council has made innovative plans to revisit the community plan and compile the next local plan as a combined process during 2003/04. The council sees land use planning as a key element in the overall planning for its communities and is therefore undertaking a combined consultation process for the new community plan and local plan. This process will include extensive public consultation similar to the original 'Up2U' and engagement with voluntary groups through 'Angels2'. It is intended to ensure that staff, partners and communities are effectively engaged in planning for the future.
- 103 The council's self assessment included an ambitious but realistic and succinct improvement plan, which is also incorporated in the BVPP for 2003/04. The plan clearly shows links into the council's other plans and strategies rather than being an additional stand-alone document.
- 104 The council's capital strategy and asset management plan were both rated as 'good' by the government office.
- 105 The waste management strategy has been determined in conjunction with the Waste Disposal Authority (WDA). The strategy gives clear attention to recycling whilst reducing waste collection. Whilst targets vary slightly between those recorded by the council and the WDA, the actions planned are ambitious.
- 106 The council has plans in place in relation to diversity. It put in place a race equality scheme to meet its duty under the Race Relations (Amendment) Act, and is seeking to integrate this into its wider planning processes. Plans are in place to take key actions, such as further monitoring of trends among its employees. The council objectives include acting to improve equality of opportunity and promoting social inclusion, and it is tackling issues of fair access to services through a current best value review. However, in common with other strategies and plans, the equality plan and action plan do not contain specific long term targets, although some go up to 2005.

- 107 While the community plan and associated documents clearly set out the overall direction for the council, they are less clear about the specific desired outcomes. In many cases it is necessary to read lower level plans to identify the specific targets. While there are examples of long-term targets in key areas in the 2003/04 programme for action, not all areas have long-term targets. The council acknowledges that improvements are necessary to the targets set in the community plan.
- 108 The plans which the council currently has in place for the future are generally based on the community plan compiled in 2000. Some need updating. For example, the anti-poverty strategy was put in place in 1998, before the development of the community plan and current council objectives.
- 109 The council's future plan for development, the local plan, is an important document in relation to the key priority of affordable housing. The formal adoption of the current plan has been beset by significant difficulties. These included legal challenges by developers and late notification of infrastructure requirements, including highway improvements and school provision. However, the council has been able to use the unadopted local plan as a sound basis for decision making. The plan was formally adopted in March 2003.

## Summary of theme scores and strengths / weaknesses

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Ambition	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ambitions rooted in a robust community planning process</li> <li>• Effective engagement with partners</li> <li>• Effective community leadership role</li> <li>• Effective internal leadership</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community plan and council objectives unclear about some medium and long term outcomes</li> <li>• Targets expressed in high-level documents (both long term and annual) not always sufficiently specific</li> </ul>
Prioritisation	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good consultation and evidence-gathering for community plan</li> <li>• Annual consultation of budget priorities</li> <li>• Staff and partners are clear on the council's priorities</li> <li>• Resources are being allocated to priority areas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explicit priorities are very broad – not clear with the public what is not a priority or whether any priorities are more important than others</li> </ul>
Focus	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to sustain focus on key issues over time</li> <li>• Well focused officer and member meetings</li> <li>• Cabinet portfolios reflecting community plan themes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Housing performance deteriorated when council diverted effort to LSVT preparation</li> </ul>
Capacity	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Able and committed members, with extensive training programme</li> <li>• Good officer-member relationships</li> <li>• Good staff morale and commitment</li> <li>• Management restructuring to increase strategic capacity</li> <li>• Effective use of partnerships to deliver.</li> <li>• IIP accreditation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of IT underdeveloped</li> </ul>
Performance management	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Required elements of a performance management system in place</li> <li>• Effective individual appraisal linked to team plans</li> <li>• Monitoring of performance leading to action to tackle declining performance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Risk management not fully integrated in service planning</li> </ul>

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Achievement in quality of service	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• User satisfaction good in planning and waste</li> <li>• Good PIs on environment</li> <li>• 'Good' services; revenues, environment and 'economy'</li> <li>• Real outcomes on the ground –drainage, rural diversification, sustaining village life, town centre enhancements, women's refuge</li> <li>• BFI rate benefits as fair</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some unsatisfactory housing PIs and concerns over quality and value for money of repairs service</li> <li>• Unsatisfactory leisure and culture PIs - low satisfaction</li> </ul>
Achievement of improvement	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Significant improvements in benefits</li> <li>• Improvements in recycling</li> <li>• Community facilities improved and supported</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No clear overall trend of improvement in performance indicators</li> <li>• Deterioration in planning performance over a three year period</li> <li>• Not significantly improved on housing performance</li> </ul>
Investment	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• LSVT is major investment in future of housing</li> <li>• Openness to external challenge</li> <li>• Direct public challenge encouraged</li> <li>• External funding secured</li> <li>• Internal challenge through effective scrutiny</li> <li>• Examples of robust best value reviews</li> <li>• New project management arrangements implemented</li> <li>• Significant investment to improve IT</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unsophisticated medium term financial planning</li> <li>• Strategic procurement not developed</li> </ul>
Learning	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good examples of learning from past experience – project management, SNIP</li> <li>• Responded to IDeA improvement programme</li> <li>• Applying learning from other authorities; kerb side collections, LSVT</li> <li>• Weekly learning hours to share learning internally</li> </ul>	

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Future plans	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Innovative approach to compilation of new community plan and local plan as combined exercise</li> <li>• Clear waste management strategy</li> <li>• Capital strategy and asset management plan rated as 'good'</li> <li>• Basis for housing plans improved via LSVT vote</li> <li>• Sound improvement plan, linked to BVPP</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Long-term targets not always in place in future plans</li> <li>• Some plans need updating e.g. anti-poverty strategy</li> </ul>

**Scoring key:**

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

## Appendix 1 – Decent homes standard (DHS) diagnostic assessment

### What is the council trying to achieve in relation to the standard? Does the council know the condition of their housing stock and their compliance with the DHS?

- 110 The council has clear ambitions in relation to the standard. The council is aware of the condition of its stock and therefore its compliance with the DHS. Consequently, this is an area with a low priority for improvement focus.
- 111 There is a clear long term ambition for the council's housing stock condition contained within the community plan. This is to ensure *“that detailed plans were prepared to ensure all council housing is brought up to good standard for the next 30 years.”* Within the housing revenue account (HRA) business plan this is extended to include not just improvements to dwellings but also improving the environment surrounding them. This ambition was developed from extensive consultation with key stakeholders for the community plan. This has ensured that the key objective is owned and shared within the council and all stakeholders who are affected by the work of the council. This community plan objective has not, however, been translated into a specific objective. The community plan objectives for housing are not reflected in the community plan programme for action. Despite this, the long term ambitions are shared with South Norfolk Housing Partnership, the new registered social landlord.
- 112 Within the HRA business plan, the council has a clearly stated objective to *“enhance the quality of life of the council's tenants by the provision, maintenance, improvement and management of good quality, responsive, comprehensive council housing at affordable rents.”* The plan also confirms that the DHS is the main investment priority. The ambitions for the stock in the medium term are to achieve the DHS by 2008 within current resources and that a minimum of one third of its stock will meet the DHS by April 2004. The estimated expenditure required over the next 10 years to bring the properties up to the DHS is £8.4 million. The council is looking to transfer its council houses through the Large Scale Voluntary Transfer (LSVT) process as the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) is no longer sustainable without significant reductions in its capital and revenue costs.
- 113 In moving towards becoming an LSVT council, a 'yes' ballot vote from tenants has been achieved. This has been achieved through the undertaking of a thorough options appraisal from an initial best value review. This represents a robust and positive approach for the council. The project, from initiation to ballot, was undertaken through the application of detailed project management principles including the appointment of consultants and advisors to ensure that the proposals represented the most suitable route for tenants and the council. More than 68 per cent of all tenants who voted were in favour of the proposals to transfer the stock. This has been achieved through undertaking an extensive consultation exercise by officers, which included visiting most tenants in their homes twice. This was necessary to ensure that tenants' views for improvements were captured and secondly that they were aware of the proposals and the need for a ballot.

- 114 There has been a wide scale approach to involving tenants in the development of the decent homes programme. There was extensive stakeholder and tenant involvement in the development of the housing strategy and HRA business plan and the proposals towards and beyond LSVT. However, the council has not consulted with tenants on what it is specifically trying to achieve through its decent homes programme. As a result of this, tenants are unaware of the programme, its scope and contents. This is an area recognised by the council for action and which it intends to address within its next newsletter to all tenants.
- 115 The council's other medium term ambitions also include improvements to the quality of service provided. These have been developed through extensive consultation, surveys and feedback. These outcomes are extensively detailed within the LSVT offer document. These ambitions cover a range of service improvements, such as the expansion of the repairs appointments initiative and the use of mediation as a solution to neighbour disputes. The offer document also addresses wider issues such as security, tenant involvement, estate management of the local environment.
- 116 A number of important surveys have been carried out on council housing and private sector housing, as well as a housing need survey. This will enable the council to access strategic information about housing conditions, demand for housing across the district and to make strategic investment decisions. However, due to LSVT and the recent completion of the surveys the council has only begun to take on board this information to review its policies.
- 117 The stock condition survey undertaken in 2001 confirmed that 44 per cent of the council's 4,310 housing stock did not meet the DHS. The survey quantified that £194 million was needed to maintain the stock in good condition over the next 30 years. The survey was based on a 20 per cent sample which included all property types. This sample has been used to estimate the condition of all properties from which certain components of the current programme have been derived.
- 118 The council is currently adding to the initial 20 per cent sample through its own inspections in order to verify and check the assumptions that were made as part of carrying out the original survey. There is a commitment within the 2002 HRA business plan to update the survey. The council plans to raise the sample rate so that eventually it has 100 per cent coverage by 2007/08 beginning with an additional 20 per cent by the end of the current financial year. It is planned to continue the rolling five year inspection programme beyond the current time scales so that its stock information is reasonably up to date. The stock information gathered in the previous year is being used to support and verify the improvement work required in the proceeding year. As a result of this approach, the council is confident that it will still meet the DHS target whilst having a far more accurate property stock condition database.
- 119 The initial survey did not inspect properties for asbestos or structural integrity and this therefore represents a weakness. This is an area the council has little information on currently which is critical for investment planning purposes. A further inspection programme is to be procured to undertake these in the next financial year. For asbestos, the council is prioritising those properties sold through the right to buy in the first instance. This represents a positive initiative by the council as this information will be used towards its own stock in the interim and also those of the new housing association in due course.

- 120 The stock condition survey revealed that, overall, the properties are in a good condition and have been well maintained. The level of outstanding or “catch-up” repairs required is low when compared to other councils: £6.03 million or 3.12 per cent of the total expenditure to the overall stock. The council is again confident that this backlog can be addressed by 2008 within current resources. This is particularly challenging due to the postponement of the pre-planned maintenance programme for 2003.
- 121 The housing department has an established programme for estate surveys of its communal and open land, which details the priorities for inspection. This sets out the quality of service the council is aspiring to deliver. The council has been able to programme repairs and improvements through this mechanism to ensure that its communal and open land is appropriately maintained. This initiative therefore represents a strength to the service.
- 122 The various property databases held by the council are not linked. The council has considerable information about its stock held on a number of databases. This includes information collected from responsive maintenance, pre-planned maintenance, capital programmes and the stock condition survey. When combined manually, this provides a robust base of qualitative information about the stock condition which is used to inform the proceeding year’s improvement programme. The council is currently procuring software that would enable the interfacing of the various data databases.
- 123 The council evaluated a range of options as part of the best value review which was undertaken in 2001:
- ◆ Retention of the housing stock.
  - ◆ Selective sales with vacant possession.
  - ◆ Formation of an arms length company.
  - ◆ The private finance initiative (PFI).
  - ◆ Partial and full scale transfer.
- 124 The appraisal concluded that stock transfer was the only sustainable option for the continued investment in and management of the housing stock. In undertaking the options appraisal, the council has considered the economic impact on the general fund and housing revenue account. The options appraisal also detailed a number of sensitivity tests undertaken to validate the robustness and impact of key assumptions. This has ensured that a robust appraisal was undertaken.
- 125 Tenants were actively engaged in the appraisal process and were supported throughout with their own appointed independent tenant advisor. The council also prudently considered the impact of a “No” vote with lead cabinet members and the tenants federation. This approach has reinforced the council’s diligence with which it has approached the options appraisal and its proposals to pursue LSVT as the favoured route.
- 126 The business plan confirms that the housing revenue account is no longer sustainable without significant reductions in its capital and revenue costs. This is



- 134 The council's information technology (IT) systems are not sufficiently developed to develop an effective programme of works that addresses the DHS. The council is currently reliant on an inefficient manually based system to track progress towards the DHS. Although the council is currently procuring software to enable the various databases to be interfaced, there will be a significant lead in time before this becomes an effective and accurate tool for recording and monitoring progress. In the interim the council is reliant on manual processes to maintain and keep up to date the stock condition survey information and therefore represents a weakness.
- 135 The HRA business plan confirmed shortcomings in the programme to achieve DHS. For example, the HRA business plan detailed the council's programme for achieving DHS by 2008 to address the 1,957 of 4,310 properties that are currently defined as not meeting the standard. The initial programme was based on the assumption that the initial failure rate remained at 1,957 throughout the period to 2007/08, therefore, deterioration had been excluded from the programme. However, the stock condition survey confirmed that there are further component failures which need to be addressed to achieve the DHS, some of which are beyond the 2008 target. This effectively meant that unless the properties deteriorating beyond 2008 were tackled before this date the DHS programme will not be achieved. This is an area that has now been addressed through developing a five-year programme that not only ensures that all properties are inspected, but also that all works required to achieve the decent homes standard are included in that programme. Finance to achieve the DHS for these properties has been identified through the South Norfolk Housing Partnership's draft business plan.
- 136 The council's DHS reports confirm that in the first year of the programme 301 properties were brought up to the standard. This represents a significant achievement which also confirms that resources are being targeted towards the standard. Although this is against a planned target of 200 within the business plan this additional number has been achieved through the exclusion of properties that have been sold through the right to buy, through verification of property condition following inspection or where work has been undertaken through previous maintenance.
- 137 There are many examples of partnership working at the council. These include its approach towards Egan compliance in its maintenance activities. There are positive examples of partnering arrangements in place for the last few years for rewiring and kitchen and bathroom improvements. Current proposals include the appointment of joint apprenticeships with contractors to assist the sustainability of the workforce and also expanding partnering arrangements to include other DHS components and those that are in addition to the DHS. Aside from maintenance the council also held a "partners conference" as part of its LSVT proposals to discuss with current and potential partners the proposals for LSVT, opportunities for joint working and also areas for improvement.

#### **How well does the council monitor its progress and how effectively does this feed into future strategies and plans?**

- 138 The council is monitoring its progress and has ensured that this information informs future plans and strategies. Monitoring is therefore a low priority for improvement focus.

- 139 The council has commenced a programme to train staff on DHS and in particular undertaking stock condition inspections. This is to be achieved through retraining staff who would otherwise have been engaged in the current pre-planned maintenance programme. It is anticipated that in undertaking the remaining inspections an assessment on the “reasonable repair” and “housing fitness standard” will also be undertaken. Such a course of action will enable the council to build upon the initial 20 per cent sample undertaken for the stock condition survey. The intentions are to eventually achieve 100 per cent inspections through undertaking 20 per cent inspections of the stock each year. The inspections being focussed on those properties that would be subject to pre-planned maintenance programme. This will enable the council to have quality information about the stock and improve the accuracy and reliability of improvement programmes.
- 140 The council employs a number of processes to monitor its progress against various actions. These include the progressing of the actions arising from the HRA business plan, the housing strategy, the strategic best value review and key performance indicators. Progress against these are regularly updated and reported through the strategic housing service plan.
- 141 Budget expenditure is reviewed on a regular basis and reported to council on a quarterly basis. Capital programme expenditure within the housing service is reviewed on a monthly basis by officers and on a quarterly basis by cabinet. The council uses project management tools to ensure that projects are delivered in accordance with scope, budget and time. The council has achieved 100 per cent expenditure of its housing capital programme over the last three years.
- 142 Services are being delivered to a high level of satisfaction evidenced through annual satisfaction surveys. The council’s own surveys reveal that customer satisfaction has increased to 97.2 per cent. The council also uses other opportunities to receive feedback. These include satisfaction surveys following the completion of all responsive repairs and completion of improvements funded through the capital programme. The council has not, however, established such a mechanism for its gas servicing contract. Such an omission has reduced the opportunities for tenants to feedback to the council on a major activity and therefore represents a weakness.
- 143 The strategic housing function is reviewed through its service plan, the remaining landlord function service plan is still to be developed and approved. In the interim the service is reviewed through its detailed 2002 business plan which contains many of the key service planning components. This also includes how the longer term key actions arising from the former best value review are to be addressed. Although the decision was deliberate, due to the timing of the LSVT ballot, the absence of an up to date service plan represents a weakness in the delivery of the service as the immediate short term targets may not be evident for all staff.
- 144 The way in which current performance against the DHS is calculated is adequate but is recognised as having room for improvement through the implementation of revised IT systems and processes. These are areas which the council is currently progressing. Quarterly reports of performance are considered by managers, by cabinet and by the Tenants Federation. This includes key performance indicator data about the council’s progress against the DHS. The reporting is based upon manual systems and processes about how many properties have had improvement work undertaken and how many remain.

**Summary of DHS diagnostic judgements and strengths / weaknesses**

Area of focus	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
<p>What is the council trying to achieve in relation to the standard? Does the council know the condition of their housing stock and their compliance with the DHS?</p>	b	<p>Clear corporate commitment and ambition for council stock to meet the DHS by 2008.</p> <p>The council has an up to date stock condition survey based on a 20 per cent sample.</p> <p>A wide range of options were considered as part of the council's stock options appraisal with close involvement of stakeholders and tenants.</p> <p>'Yes' tenants vote achieved to pursue LSVT of council housing stock.</p>	<p>Work to further update and validate stock condition survey only recently commenced.</p> <p>No tenant involvement in preparing detailed programmes for meeting the DHS.</p> <p>The council does not as yet have detailed information about asbestos or structural integrity.</p> <p>No robust IT systems that combine the various databases to enable an accurate position of the stock to be readily reached.</p>
<p>Is the council delivering its plans to meet the DHS?</p>	b	<p>Potential sources of resources have been identified and shifted towards DHS.</p> <p>Work programme has been developed to cover the next five years.</p> <p>Council has delivered housing capital programmes for last 3 years and has made a good start on reducing the number of homes that fail to meet the DHS.</p>	<p>Thorough review of where resources are presently spent is still to be undertaken to ensure council maximises its resources for meeting the DHS.</p> <p>The proportion of responsive repairs is high. Most authorities achieve better value for money by greater planned maintenance to help them meet the DHS.</p>
<p>How well does the council monitor its progress and how effectively does this feed into future strategies and plans?</p>	b	<p>Performance is reported to cabinet on a quarterly basis.</p> <p>Regular follow up of the best value review improvement plan.</p> <p>High satisfaction levels with services provided to tenants.</p>	<p>The service lacks an up to date service plan for the landlord function.</p> <p>Performance reporting is still currently reliant on manual processes which provide the council with less accurate information than is necessary.</p>
<b>DHS diagnostic assessment judgement</b>		B	

**Scoring key:**

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

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

## **Appendix 2 - Public space diagnostic assessment**

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

- 145 The council has many strengths in the way it manages the physical environment. The council covers a large rural area. It works effectively with partners to achieve improvements in the many villages and small towns around the district. The council has made one of its eight key objectives 'safeguarding the environment'. Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area and it is a low priority for improvement focus.
- 146 The council gives specific attention to economic, environmental and social factors in achieving sustainable developments often using section 106 agreements. A new village green at Tivetshall is to be created by the developer of a small new housing development, including affordable housing. Although, contrary to the local plan, villagers have expressed a desire for this development. The council also sustains village life with grant aid. A new village hall at Tibenham was opened in July 2003. The council contributed £50,000 towards the total cost of £1½ million, and helped the villagers apply for funding from other sources. The villagers raised £15,000. Help has been given to village shopkeepers to ensure the retention of shops. A national chain of supermarkets assists with training and advice. The impact of this work helps retain the viability and sustainability of villages as cohesive communities.
- 147 The council is good at focussing on key local environmental issues. An example is flooding. There are 51 areas likely to flood in South Norfolk. Using a combination of education, enforcement and partnership working, the council has been successful in getting many landowners to upgrade their part of the watercourse. At Shelfanger this included five public bodies. However, much of the work so far has been reactive. There are not sufficient staff to be proactive and undertake all the work. Therefore, it is proposed to build a further £52,000 into the medium term plan for 2004/05 and future years. This will provide sustained attention to this priority work, with six sites targeted for early attention. The impact of this work is the reduction of flooding impacting on people's homes and livelihoods.
- 148 Town centre enhancements are being achieved across the district. This is often in partnership with the county council and others. Improvements to Harleston town centre have been jointly funded with English Heritage. Additional grant aid was achieved from the heritage lottery fund. The physical environment of the town centre has been enhanced. Environmental improvements have been achieved in other towns and more are planned.
- 149 The council has a well structured plan to provide for people with disabilities. The disability access audit details all works necessary for their six buildings to reach the required accessibility standards of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. Three are now compliant with the Act. Two buildings are being adapted and will be compliant by October 2004. Meanwhile alternative premises are being sought for the final building, Diss Tourist Information Centre. There is also budgeted commitment to achieve improvements to car parks for disabled people.

- 150 Consistent advice is provided to developers on the quality of design expected from planning proposals and on sustainability and energy conservation. The local plan policies document was only formally adopted early in 2003. Adoption was late, due to legal challenges. But this did not in itself delay developments. Approvals were granted on the draft document before formal adoption.
- 151 The council actively promotes good quality design. It provides training to professional planning agents who submit applications. Here specific attention is given to environmental context, design and landscape. Regular training is provided to parish councils by officers to help them to be more effective in their representations. The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment is to deliver training to planning committee councillors as a pilot project. The council is one of only 12 other local authorities invited to participate. This is in addition to the extensive training provided to councillors on planning committees. An annual design award recognises the contribution of schemes to improving the quality of the built environment. The impact of this work is to strengthen the council's ability to ensure good design.
- 152 The council itself demonstrates good design. It is implementing a sculpture trail along navigable watercourses. The most recent addition is eight pieces of sculpture in Surlingham following public involvement. This has been financially supported from regional arts lottery funds. This work has an impact on the physical environment, tourism and the local economy.
- 153 National performance indicators for planning are mixed. The speed of determining applications is now recovering following a marked deterioration, although it has remained above average throughout. After a fall from 74 per cent of applications within eight weeks in 2000/2001 to 65 per cent in 2002/03, the council took action and there are recent indications that this has been effective.
- 154 The performance of the council in providing electronic access to planning services, by use of the internet, is mixed. Planning applications and decisions are available on the web, but links in the website are poor. The website's A - Z guide mostly only contains telephone and e-mail contact numbers. There is no link to the planning pages. Responses to e-mails are quick and helpful. The council is aware of mixed performance and is investing in new information technology to improve services.
- 155 The council has an effective enforcement strategy. This supports the objectives of the council, the community plan, and the government's enforcement concordat. The council is effective in its enforcement policies and actions.
- 156 The council takes good care of the natural environment. For example, an employment generation project being planned in Sawmills will also create reed beds, and a wildlife area.
- 157 The council is good at involving local people in managing their own affairs. It manages registered commons with local steering groups. At Hales Green this involves local residents, landowners, businesses, parish and district councillors as well as local organisations such as a cricket club. A countryside stewardship scheme is an operation facilitating traditional grazing of common land. The council has secured local commitment to environmental issues.

- 158 The council is working with the South Norfolk alliance towards a climate change policy. Although it is not a priority to adopt the eco-management and audit scheme, there is some action on global environmental issues. Examples include a pilot scheme converting council vehicles to LPG to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, joining the carbon reduction programme of the University of East Anglia, undertaking a national pilot village energy audit, and partnership working with parish councils. Work is progressing on a climate change strategy, but there is no end date for this strategy to be in place.
- 159 There is good environmental control. Air quality is generally good. The air quality review submitted to the government (DEFRA) was approved. There is no need for a local air quality strategy. A current source of concern is the odorous emissions from a local plastics factory. Whilst it has taken longer than anticipated, the council has negotiated improvements to take place later in 2003. The council has also been successful in reducing nuisances in scrap yards, contaminated land and waste burning. The council has acted to reduce nuisance to protect the environment and address local concerns.

#### **Does the council help keep the locality clean?**

- 160 The council is effectively applying the waste hierarchy of 'reduce > reuse > recycle > dispose' to its waste removal operations. Reducing waste and increasing recycling is a national priority. It is also of intense interest to local people and a current priority for the council. The council maintains its open spaces in a generally clean condition. There is close integrated working with the Waste Disposal Authority and all other district councils in Norfolk. There are considerable strengths in this area of work and it is therefore a very low priority for improvement focus.
- 161 The performance of the council in waste management is good. Performance measured by nationally comparable indicators shows the council in the second best performing group of all councils for waste recycling and kilograms of waste collected and close to performance in the top 25 per cent in the country in both categories (in 2001/02). The number of missed bins from collection rounds is amongst the lowest in the country (in the best performing group of all councils). For the second time, Charter Mark accreditation has been achieved for the refuse and recycling service.
- 162 There is an active policy to increase recycling and reduce waste. 12,000 properties are being added to an alternate week collection system this year. Recycling rates are targeted to improve from 13 per cent in 2001/02, to 20 per cent by 2003/04, 25 per cent by 2004/05 and 30 per cent by 2005/06. The council will meet statutory recycling targets in 2003/04 and 2005/06. The government has not set any targets for subsequent years.
- 163 The council has been very successful in community leadership in this area. Public concern was expressed prior to alternate week waste collection. The council studied other councils that had successfully, and unsuccessfully, introduced schemes. There was an extensive publicity campaign about the changes prior to introduction. The impact was that the council introduced a system that worked right first time, achieving high public satisfaction with the change.

- 164 Another strength is the attention given to reducing waste in future. A microchip is embedded in each bin. This allows a detailed analysis of the amount of waste per household, and also for trade waste to be collected with domestic waste. This increases efficiency. The microchip is being developed in partnership with the University of East Anglia. Best performing villages and individual households will be applauded. Results will allow the council to measure the impact of its waste reduction strategy.
- 165 Home composting is encouraged. The council has the highest number of domestic composters in the country according to research by the University of East Anglia. Little compostable material has been collected in the past as the relatively small size of refuse sacks provided generally limited their use to domestic waste. The impact is that compostable waste to landfill is minimised.
- 166 Public spaces are kept clean and tidy throughout the district. The council believes in education and enforcement to ensure adequate cleanliness. An education programme targeted at reducing dog fouling led to complaints falling by 58 per cent, between 1997 and 2003.
- 167 The council is actively addressing fly-tipping. In October 2003 staff are to be trained to be more effective. For example, the dog warden will be authorised to take enforcement action on fly-tipping. Similarly, grounds maintenance team leaders are to be trained and authorised to enforce the law relating to fly-tipping and dog fouling. A hit squad to remove fly-tipping is being considered from April 2004.
- 168 The council is good at providing easy access to local people to report complaints and concerns, by telephone (the help line), post, e-mail, and personal visit to offices of councils. Action is taken to rectify concerns.

#### **Does the council work with partners to improve community safety?**

- 169 South Norfolk is an area of low crime. A comprehensive audit in 2001/2002 provided the basis for the work of the crime reduction partnership (CDRP). It identified key priorities for crime reduction activities. The resulting strategy included action plans to address these key priorities; burglary, domestic violence, vehicles crime and violent crime and disorder. Specific partners and resources were identified to target action on these priority areas. Regular monitoring is undertaken, with attention to actual achievements against target. Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area and it is a low priority for improvement focus.
- 170 A clear focus is apparent for the crime reduction strategy. This is based on an audit of crime in South Norfolk conducted in late 2001 / early 2002 which, overall, shows that South Norfolk is a low crime area. Data has been provided by the police, the probation service, the youth offending team and the fire service. In addition, there was a survey of 500 households and a questionnaire sent to all parish council clerks and home watch coordinators. This has led to priorities being set for tackling crime. The plan makes it clear as to which partner is leading on each issue.
- 171 Specific improvements to reduce crime have been made. Examples include installing community alarm systems to reduce burglaries, survival cards to reduce domestic violence and the provision of a women's refuge for vulnerable women with funds from the Housing Corporation. A variety of actions to reduce vehicle

crime has led to vehicle crime in 2003 reducing compared to 2002. Young offenders repair the damage that they have caused.

- 172 There is positive partnership working. The county council, with district council support, engage youth workers and drug workers to visit young people in rural areas, and to liaise and advise young people on community safety and the dangers of drug use. A bus is available to bring (young) people home from Norwich discos at weekends (and previously from Diss). The council gave essential support to help establish the first Norfolk 'crucial crew' project, a health and safety exercise for primary school children. The Police and council have jointly targeted vehicle crime. Operationally, partners work well together.
- 173 The alliance closely monitors performance. South Norfolk is amongst the best performing 25 per cent for six out of eight national indicators. These indicators measure: domestic burglary, robberies, theft of motor vehicles, theft from motor vehicles, violence against the person, and sexual offences. Performance has been stable over the years, neither improving nor deteriorating.
- 174 There is no indication that the first crime reduction strategy, 1999 – 2002, met its targets. It has not been used to inform the current crime reduction strategy, 2002 – 2006. The current monitoring reports focus a lot on actions being taken and less on outcomes, but this is improving.

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

- 175 The council is effective in providing activities to positively engage children and young people. Moreover, the council works well with the county council and other agencies and consults young people about their needs, acting on the results. Formal and informal consultations are undertaken on a regular basis, which then lead to action on the ground. However, the council has not declared the needs of young people as a priority. There are considerable strengths in this area of work and it is therefore a very low priority for improvement focus.
- 176 There is real commitment to provide for young people's needs. This is evidenced by the council's partnership with the county council's youth and community services. South Norfolk pays half the cost of an additional youth worker. Specifically this has led to the promotion of the annual youth games throughout the district, the sound summer youth activities week, together with play schemes for younger children. Many young people are involved in worthwhile activities.
- 177 A strength of the council is the positive help given to seek and meet young people's needs. Following requests made by young people, the council has specifically helped provide skateboard parks in towns and villages. At Mulbarton a survey indicated that more facilities were needed for young people. Following fundraising, a skateboard park has now been provided at a total cost of £26,000. Help, advice and a grant of £5,200 came from the council. The Waste Renewal Environmental fund (WREN - landfill tax) provided £15,000.
- 178 Another strength of the council is to establish partnerships to benefit local communities. It helped form the Harleston development partnership. Using funds from the market towns initiative programme, 14 voluntary groups have benefited from grants ranging from £200 to a maximum of £1,000. Examples of improvements include the Harleston play association, for new play equipment

designed for disabled use; Harleston junior football club; jazz angles, for a workshop for young people; and new equipment and coaching courses for a hockey club as part of their youth development programme.

- 179 The council is clear about what it can provide itself and what can be provided with others. In Diss, a partnership includes councils, the police, churches and rotary club. A children's work coordinator, part funded by the partnership, is now in place and new play equipment has been installed. Youth consultation has been undertaken, and a skateboard and BMX track is planned. Learning from this success in Diss, the council is about to start building a community room in Chedgrave. The intention is that this facility will be used for young people in the area, and a youth club.
- 180 An area where there is a known lack of sports provision has been targeted by the council, with partners. At Framingham a new community sports hall is being provided, with £600,000 from a lottery grant and £365,000 from the council. A holiday programme of activities for young people will be put in place by the council. The sports hall will not only form a base for young people's sporting activities in the east of the district but also allow the GP healthy exercise referral scheme to be expanded.
- 181 There is no overarching strategy for children and young people. Despite all this activity, the needs of young people are not indicated as a priority objective for the council. Targets have not been set to measure the success (or otherwise) of the skateboard parks. Future action will not be driven by past experience being formally analysed.
- 182 There is a clear child protection policy in place. This is effectively implemented. All staff and volunteers are screened via the Criminal Records Bureau every three years. The council is helping parish councils and voluntary groups to develop similar child protection policies. Any organisation receiving grant aid from the council is required to show that they have an active child protection policy.

### Summary of public space diagnostic assessment judgements and strengths / weaknesses

Area of focus	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
How well does the council contribute to the management of the physical environment?	b	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Active attention to key priorities including: alleviating flooding, town centre enhancements, and sustainable communities (support to the villages)</li> <li>• Quality design achieved</li> <li>• Natural environment nurtured</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mixed performance on planning</li> <li>• No climate change policy in place yet, or EMAS accreditation</li> </ul>
Does the council help keep the locality clean?	a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The amount of waste recycled is good and is set to achieve targets in 2003 / 2004</li> <li>• The area is clean</li> <li>• Enforcement and education are well used</li> </ul>	
Does the council work with partners to improve community safety?	b	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leading an operationally active Crime Reduction Partnership</li> <li>• Strategy based on a comprehensive audit with actions targeted at priority crimes and vulnerable groups</li> <li>• A wide range of actions taken</li> <li>• Regular monitoring in place</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitoring reports focus more on actions and less on outcomes.</li> </ul>
Does the council contribute to activities to positively engage children and young people?	a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Active involvement with others to increase opportunities and activities for young people</li> <li>• Grant aid, advice and encouragement to outside groups</li> <li>• Increasing skateparks and other activities for young people</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of measurable targets and evaluation of many projects</li> <li>• Not a clear priority</li> </ul>
<b>Public space diagnostic assessment judgement</b>	<b>B</b>		

**Scoring key**

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

a = very low

b = low

c = high

d = very high

## Appendix 3 - Appointed auditor assessment

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

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

### Scoring key

1 = inadequate

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

3 = adequate

4 = good

## Appendix 4 - Benefit Fraud Inspectorate assessment

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

### Current performance

**Overall, we found that South Norfolk Council's Benefits service is providing a fair performance. South Norfolk Council's current performance demonstrates a number of strengths. These include:**

- ◆ policies and strategies that provide comprehensive coverage of benefits administration and counter-fraud work;
- ◆ good access and facilities for the majority of customers to contact the benefits service. South Norfolk Council has successfully gained charter mark accreditation;
- ◆ compliance with the Verification Framework;
- ◆ a rigorous pre-notification checking programme;
- ◆ effective liaison with landlords;
- ◆ Internal audit providing assurance on the security of the system making and reconciling payments;
- ◆ an annual counter-fraud business plan that includes the number of sanctions and prosecutions to be achieved; and
- ◆ effective overpayment recovery procedures.

185 However, there are some areas where South Norfolk Council needs to develop further to fully meet the BFI and Department for Work and Pensions' (the Department's) Performance Standards framework. These include:

- ◆ improving internal and external working arrangements;
- ◆ introducing a claim form that meets the standards of the BFI's model form;
- ◆ conducting further research on the accessibility of the service to its customers, particularly those in work;
- ◆ improving processing times for new claims and changes of circumstances;
- ◆ taking action within 7 calendar days of receiving sufficient information on changes of circumstances, to prevent overpayments continuing.

### **Proven capacity to improve**

186 We assessed South Norfolk Council's proven capacity to improve as **good**. South Norfolk Council was able to demonstrate the following positive aspects:

- ◆ a commitment from members, senior officers and staff to continuously improve performance;
- ◆ a commitment to significant change, including restructuring the benefits service;
- ◆ a track record in achieving improvement as evidenced in the:
  - ◆ development of a best value improvement plan following the best value review of 2001;
  - ◆ smooth implementation of the Verification Framework in October 1999;
  - ◆ significant improvement in the best value performance indicators in respect of new claims, renewal claims and changes of circumstances along with a staged target to achieve Standard by 2005;
  - ◆ clear support, commitment and a documented action plan to achieve performance standards by 2005; and
  - ◆ commissioning of a new computer system to be implemented in June 2003 to improve efficiency of the benefits service.

187 In addition, South Norfolk Council have taken this opportunity to:

- ◆ improve management information;
- ◆ ensure that all letters meet regulatory requirements;
- ◆ ensure documented procedures are in plain English; and
- ◆ ensure that evidence of detailed operational and contingency plans to enable the smooth transition to the new benefits IT system and to ensure performance and improvements are maintained.

188 We would like to thank South Norfolk Council staff, particularly the performance and strategy manager, the head of revenues service and the benefits manager for their assistance and co-operation with the assessment process.

189 This report has been produced pursuant to powers contained in sections 10 and 11 of the Local Government Act 1999.

## Appendix 5 - Framework for Comprehensive Performance Assessment

- 190 This comprehensive performance assessment was carried out under the Local Government Act 1999. Local councils have a general duty under Section 3 of this Act to secure continuous improvement in the exercise of their functions. Section 10 gives the Audit Commission the power to inspect councils' performance of the general duty of improvement.
- 191 The main elements of the assessment were:
- ◆ a self-assessment completed by the council;
  - ◆ accredited peer challenge to inform the council's self-assessment;
  - ◆ a corporate assessment of the council's overall effectiveness in supporting services to deliver improvements;
  - ◆ an assessment of the council's service delivery performance through two diagnostic assessments on:
    - ◆ management of public space;
    - ◆ progress in meeting the decent homes standard;
  - ◆ Benefit Fraud Inspectorate's (BFI) assessment of benefit services;
  - ◆ appointed auditor assessments of performance on each of the main elements of the code of audit practice; and
  - ◆ audited performance indicators, inspection reports and plan assessments.
- 192 The assessment for South Norfolk was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 21 to 25 July.
- 193 This report has been discussed with the council, which has been given the opportunity to examine the Audit Commission's assessment. This report will be used as the basis for improvement planning by the council.