

Corporate Assessment Report

February 2008



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Corporate Assessment

Bracknell Forest Borough Council

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Introduction

- 1 Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) is the means by which the Audit Commission fulfils its statutory duty, under section 99 of the Local Government Act 2003, to make an assessment, and report on the performance of local authorities. Corporate assessment is one element in the overall assessment that leads to a CPA score and category.
- 2 The purpose of the corporate assessment is to assess how well the Council engages with and leads its communities, delivers community priorities in partnership with others, and ensures continuous improvement across the range of Council activities. It seeks to answer three headline questions which are underpinned by five specific themes.
 - What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?
 - Ambition
 - Prioritisation
 - What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?
 - Capacity
 - Performance management
 - What has been achieved?
 - Achievement
 - Considered against the shared priorities of:
 - sustainable communities and transport;
 - safer and stronger communities;
 - healthier communities;
 - older people; and
 - children and young people.
- 3 Corporate assessments are normally aligned with a joint area review of services for children and young people (JAR). In practice this means that the Council's achievements in relation to children and young people are assessed using the evidence provided from the JAR. In addition, examples of outcomes and activity, which are relevant to the other themes and which are identified through the JAR, are considered within the corporate assessment.

- 4 The JAR covers all services for children and young people that are directly managed or commissioned by the Council, as well as health and youth justice services provided by other bodies. It focuses on the contributions made by services to improving outcomes. The separate JAR report covers the leadership and management of services for children and young people and, in particular, the way that such services work together to improve outcomes. The description and judgement in respect of children and young people in this report is summarised from the JAR report.

Executive summary

- 5 Overall the Council is performing well. The Council is very ambitious and with its partners it has developed clear and challenging ambitions that reflect its community's needs. Ambitions are rooted in a strong sense of pride in the area, commitment to quality of life and the environment and are informed by good knowledge of what is important to local people. The regeneration of Bracknell town centre is an overriding and challenging ambition which clearly reflects the Council's outstanding commitment, pride and ambition for its community and the region. This scheme is central to achieving many aspects of the Council's priorities and confidence in the delivery of this ambitious scheme is now high. The Council's engagement, consultation and communication with the public is effective. It has a well informed sustainable approach to issues and good awareness of the local, regional and national context.
- 6 The Council has an excellent understanding of the challenges it faces. Political and managerial leadership is good and well regarded. The Council takes a leading role with partners in shaping the challenging and realistic ambitions through the Bracknell Forest Partnership, in developing the Local Area Agreement (LAA) and a new sustainable community strategy. This clearly articulates the longer-term vision for the Borough and its importance within the region. The Council's overarching priorities for 2008 to 2011 are appropriately focused on local and national issues and reflect the needs of local communities. Partnership working is good. The Council is inclusive in its approach, highly engaging and receptive to new ideas. The Local Development Framework (LDF) sets a clear long-term vision to 2026. It is ambitious, prioritises plans for over 11,000 houses and identifies new major urban extensions to Bracknell Town. The Council has made good progress in the LDF and supporting documents and this is recognised by the Government Office as best practice. The Council's longer-term plans provide a good framework for service planning and include the views of partners.
- 7 The Council has robust plans to deliver priorities and resources are allocated accordingly. The Council is successful in delivering its priorities, in taking difficult decisions and in moving resources to priority areas. This has included an additional £1 million for children's services this year and priority areas such as street cleansing and waste disposal have also received additional funding to maintain the high quality of these services. Performance management is effective, with strong commitment to it across the Council and most importantly, performance management is used to drive improvement. Overview and scrutiny is good, rigorously challenging performance and this leads to improved services. This is evident in the recent improvements made in adult social services and in the robust challenge it is pursuing to increase health funding for the area.

- 8 The Council has good capacity. It has knowledgeable and effective councillors, robust decision frameworks and supportive and well trained staff. It increases its capacity through good partnership working and effective service management. A workforce plan for the whole Council is not yet in place to match its own and partners' future vision for services. This is important to help ensure that its workforce meets future service needs and capacity challenges.
- 9 Finance is well managed. The Council has a good track record in managing its financial capacity and balancing its budget. Effective budget monitoring is helping to address potential overspends and the proposed housing stock transfer will provide additional capacity in the transition. The Council performs well in achieving and improving value for money. It has delivered efficiency savings in excess of targets and it addresses value for money when buying goods and services. Financial reporting and management are effective. The Council has identified options, including restructuring some services and possible reductions in some service areas, to bring its budget into balance in line with its high level priorities. This means that potentially difficult service decisions remain to be taken by the Council and communicated to the public. However, the Council is well placed to take these decisions and maintain its priority services.
- 10 The Council understands its communities, uses good analysis of needs and communicates well to residents and other stakeholders. It provides good access to its services based on its broad knowledge of local need. The Council's work to improve its achievement and approach to equalities and diversity is making steady progress. It is well aware that its communities are changing, and its work to fully understand this is progressing well. The area has an increasing number of people from BME communities and the Council in the past has not found it easy to access their views. It has more to do to systematically make contact with and coordinate and analyse the needs of young people, parents and carers from BME communities and the most disadvantaged communities and vulnerable groups. However, the Council's recent consultation with BME groups is positive and a new BME forum is now established. Work is progressing well to complete its community mapping and to refresh its community cohesion strategy. This is important in assuring that future services meet all needs.
- 11 The Council can show significant achievement in all its priority areas. It has a history of achievement in most services and in improving its weaker service areas. Its achievements range from national and regional issues - addressing the growth agenda, need for affordable housing and sustainability - to meeting the needs of local residents, where 72 per cent of local people believe that the Council is making the local area a better place to live. Customer satisfaction with Council services remains above average when compared to other councils. Achievement, as demonstrated by national performance indicators, is good.

- 12 The Council, with its partners, has delivered community benefits across the shared priorities. It is performing well in building safer and stronger communities. The Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP) has improved, crime levels are relatively low and partnership working to tackle crime and anti-social behaviour is improving. The CDRP has good information on residents' fear of crime in the Borough, but actions and targets to address the fear of crime are still developing.
- 13 The independence and wellbeing of older people is addressed and Adult Social Services has improved to deliver good outcomes. The planned transfer of the Council's housing stock is clearly targeted at improving the management and customer satisfaction of this service. The Council successfully promotes health and wellbeing and addresses health inequalities. A wellbeing leisure team has supported almost 1,500 additional people to take up exercise or leisure activities. Outcomes for children and young people in Bracknell are good and those most in need benefit from prompt and effective services. The Council and its partners have successfully reduced teenage pregnancy by more than 40 per cent to significantly lower rates than the national average. Educational achievement is good up to age 16 but education, training and employment outcomes for those over 16 are only adequate. Overall, these achievements show a willingness and ability to work in partnership to achieve tangible benefits for the community.
- 14 The Council has a strong focus on promoting sustainable communities and is achieving good outcomes in most areas. This includes in waste management, planning, many areas of housing and in the management of public spaces. The Council is providing some good sustainable transport outcomes including additional cycle ways and is on track to increase the number of cycling trips by 20 per cent by 2011. School travel plans and safe cycling schemes have been implemented. As a result, cycling, walking and bus use have increased while traffic growth and congestion have been kept in check. Work is in progress, but at an early stage, to fully address its own sustainability in areas such as updating its green travel plan and in reducing its own carbon footprint.

Areas for improvement

- 15 The Council should work towards achieving the higher levels of the Equalities Standard for Local Government, addressing the low representation of black and minority ethnic (BME) and disabled workers amongst its staff, and completing its current community mapping and work to better understand the needs of its BME communities and ensuring that this informs all future service planning and delivery. This is important to improve outcomes for BME communities and in ensuring services meet the needs of all sections of the community.
- 16 The local crime and disorder reduction partnership (CDRP) has clear ambitions for crime reduction and good information on the fear of crime in the Borough, but it should develop more specific actions and targets to address the fear of crime. This is important, since fear of crime is a key priority for local people. The CDRP and the Council need to be able to clearly demonstrate that its actions and initiatives result in improvement and impact in this.
- 17 The Council's corporate workforce planning is at a basic stage and it should develop a medium and longer-term workforce plan for the whole Council to match its own and partners' future vision for services. It should share and coordinate this plan with partners including the voluntary sector. This will help ensure that its workforce meets future service needs and capacity challenges.
- 18 The Council needs to build on its early work on energy efficiency, office recycling and green travel and its decision to sign the Nottingham Declaration. It must understand the sustainability impacts of its own activities, including its carbon footprint and develop clear action plans to reduce these. This will help it to meet its obligations under the Declaration and also to provide clearer community leadership on this issue.

Summary of assessment scores

Headline questions	Theme	Score*
What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?	Ambition	4
	Prioritisation	3
What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?	Capacity	3
	Performance management	3
What has been achieved?	Achievement	3
Overall corporate assessment score**		3
*Key to scores		
1 – below minimum requirements – Inadequate performance		
2 – at only minimum requirements – Adequate performance		
3 – consistently above minimum requirements – Performing well		
4 – well above minimum requirements – Performing strongly		

**Rules for determining the overall corporate assessment score

Scores on five themes	Overall corporate assessment score
Two or more themes with a score of 4 None less than score of 3	4
Three or more themes with a score of 3 or more None less than score of 2	3
Three or more themes with a score of 2 or more	2
Any other combination	1

Context

The locality

- 19 Bracknell Forest is in Berkshire, 30 miles west of London. It is one of the smallest unitary authorities in England with a population of 112,200 residents covering 109 square kilometres. It is one of six Berkshire unitary councils, all former district councils which became unitary when Berkshire County Council was abolished in 1998. The Borough consists of Bracknell town, a post-war planned new town, built between the 1950s to the 1970s which is now in need of modernisation and improvement. The Borough includes the smaller towns of Crowthorne and Sandhurst. These are linked by a number of villages and settlements separated by wooded, heath land or farmed countryside. A third of the area is woodland.
- 20 The Borough is in the prosperous Thames Valley with good access to the motorway network (M3, M4, M40 and M25), Heathrow Airport and direct trains to central London. Bracknell has high house prices and levels of prosperity and low levels of deprivation. In 2004, it ranked 319 out of 354 districts in England in terms of deprivation. The relatively small size of the Borough and its overall affluence masks differences between communities and locations. Within the Borough there are three 'super output areas' which are in the most deprived 20 per cent in the country in relation to education, skills and training. Overall crime rates in Bracknell Forest are lower than the national and south east average.
- 21 Employment is high and residents tend to work in managerial, professional, technology or other skilled occupations. Bracknell hosts the headquarters of some high-tech and internationally renowned companies. Like much of the surrounding area, there is high employment mobility. Many of the jobs in Bracknell Forest are taken by people who live outside the Borough and conversely many people from Bracknell Forest work elsewhere. Car ownership rates are high. Bracknell Forest has seen a rapid and substantial growth in population since the 1990s. Between 1991 and 2001 the population grew by 14 per cent, twice as fast as the average for south east England. This reflects the growth of the Thames Valley economy. Meeting demand for new housing and improving the infrastructure to match its buoyant economy is a key challenge.
- 22 The population of Bracknell Forest is relatively healthy, well educated and younger than the national average (average age in Bracknell Forest is 35.4 years, 11.5 per cent are of pension age; national average is 38.7 years and 8 per cent respectively). Average life expectancy in Bracknell Forest is high at 80.15 years. Levels of smoking and circulatory diseases are low although there is a higher than average number of people who are obese or have cancer. Educational achievement in GCSE and at most Key Stages is above the national average and improving.

- 23 According to the 2001 census, 5.9 per cent of the Borough's population belong to minority ethnic groups. The Borough is becoming more diverse. Since 2001 the number of school pupils from minority ethnic groups has doubled to more than 12 per cent and children in local schools now have 75 different first languages.

The Council

- 24 The Council is Conservative controlled and since 2001 has operated under a leader and cabinet model of governance. The Cabinet consists of the Leader and seven executive members (Children, Education, Adult Social Care/Housing, Planning and Transportation, Environment, Community Cohesion and Leisure). All are members of the majority party. The executive's performance is monitored by an Overview and Scrutiny commission. The Council has 42 elected councillors; the current composition is 39 Conservative and 3 Labour. Elections are held every four years, the most recent being in May 2007.
- 25 The Council is currently organised into the following main departments.
- Corporate Services.
 - Education, Children and Libraries.
 - Environment and Leisure.
 - Social Services and Housing.
- 26 The corporate management team (CMT) comprises the Chief Executive, the four directors of the main departments and the Borough Treasurer.
- 27 The Council employs 3,888 people (3080 full-time equivalent). Its budgeted gross revenue spending in 2006/07 was £61.5 million and in 2007/08 is planned to be £64 million. The Council's 2006/07 council tax for Band D was £919 per year, in 2007/08 this increased by 4.94 per cent to £964. This is the lowest of any unitary authority in England.
- 28 As part of this process and to smooth transition to unitary status in 1998 the Council used the Local Government reorganisation rules effectively to create revenue balances. Since then it has released these balances (between three and four million pounds per year) in order to deliver services and keep its Council Tax low. It had planned to bring its budget into balance by 2006. However, during this planned 'soft landing' it became a floor authority (which means relatively low increases in grant from the Government - 1 per cent for 2007/08). This, along with increasing demand in some services, such as adult care, and its limited scope for Council Tax rises, has increased the budgetary pressure on the Council.

- 29 A three-year package of savings is now being developed by the Council aimed to bring its budget into balance by 2010/11. The Council is also planning to move from three main service directorates to two, as a part of a restructure following the potential transfer of two key service areas. The Council currently has 5,570 houses and tenants have recently opted in favour of transferring ownership and management of these to a housing association in February 2008. It is also likely that the Council's leisure services will be delivered in future by a trust, rather than directly by the Council.
- 30 Bracknell Forest is in the Thames Valley Police area which covers the three counties of Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire. The Berkshire East local police Area Command Unit, and a Berkshire East Primary Care Trust (PCT) both cover three adjacent unitary councils (Bracknell Forest, Slough and Windsor & Maidenhead).
- 31 The Council is the lead partner in the Bracknell Forest Partnership (the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP)) which comprises a partnership board and partnership group with various theme-based partnerships. In 2005 the Bracknell Forest Sustainable Community Plan (SCP) - Living Together, Working Together - was published. During 2007, the Bracknell Forest Local Area Agreement (LAA) for 2007 to 2010 was agreed, incorporating the Local Public Service Agreement 2 (LPSA2). Work is currently underway with partners to prepare for the new style LAA that is to take effect from April 2008. At the same time the partnership is undertaking a review of the SCP.

What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?

Ambition

- 32 The Council is performing strongly in this area. Council leadership is good and it has developed clear and challenging ambitions with its partners that reflect the needs of its community. Ambitions are rooted in a strong sense of pride in the area and commitment to quality of life and the environment. Its ambitions are informed by good and improving knowledge of what is important to local people. The Council has a well informed, stable and focused approach to issues and challenges and is constructive in its approach to managing and working in partnership.
- 33 The Council is highly ambitious for the community it serves with a clear long-term vision to 'make Bracknell Forest a place where all people can thrive, living, learning and working in a clean, safe and healthy environment'. To deliver this it has developed with partners clear longer-term and challenging ambitions through to 2015 in eight key priority areas. These include key national and local priorities such as promoting learning, where the Council sets challenging school improvement aims, protecting the environment, improving health and wellbeing, providing decent and affordable housing and in community safety. The transfer of its housing stock includes challenging ambitions to improve housing management, accelerate the delivery of decent homes and allocate 75 per cent of the resulting capital receipt to the provision of affordable housing. The Council also has clear ambitions in relation to promoting sustainable development, whilst maintaining the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area and access to the surrounding areas of countryside and forest. Challenging targets are set by the Council to reduce waste and reliance on land fill and to increase recycling. This has driven ambitious plans and a 25-year agreement with partners to provide waste management and disposal facilities to help meet the Councils ambitious targets for waste minimisation, land-fill reduction and energy production from waste.

- 34 The scale of the Council's ambition is demonstrated in the regeneration of Bracknell town centre. This challenging project clearly reflects the Council's outstanding commitment, pride and ambition and is central to the delivery of its wider vision and ambitions for the community. The Council aims not only to improve facilities for local people but also to attract wider regional employment and economic benefits. The project aims to deliver a 'town fit for the twenty first century' and to make Bracknell a high quality regional and commercial centre. The project includes extensive new retail and leisure facilities, improved access to services, including health services, and facilities for disabled people, up to 1,000 dwellings, new business space, new civic offices, library, magistrate's court, police station, health centre, public spaces and comprehensive public transport and highway improvements. It also includes innovative plans for new council offices which are ambitious in addressing sustainability with combined heat and power systems and energy savings measures to reduce carbon emissions by 30 per cent.
- 35 This ambition is clearly articulated by the Council and strongly supported by partners and local people. After some delay, and as a result of sustained effort by the Council, confidence in the delivery of the £750 million scheme is now high among partners and in the Council. Plans for this are now agreed including a comprehensive planning and development agreement between the Council and the Bracknell Regeneration Partnership. Building work is planned to commence in 2008. This will be one of the biggest building projects in the country and is a clear indicator of the extent of the Council's ambition.
- 36 The Council is ambitious to maximise local employment benefits from the town centre regeneration scheme and improve labour supply for local and regional employers. It has recognised that such a large building project will require many skilled workers. It is also aware that its development is being undertaken at the same time as building in nearby London for the 2012 Olympic Games. As a result it has an ambitious scheme to grow, attract and develop the local and regional workforce; including a focus on opportunities for people in its most deprived wards.
- 37 Ambitions are stretching, shared with partners and aligned across all key strategies. Ambitions are challenging and sustainable and underpinned by a range of comprehensive strategies and delivery plans. The Council and its partners have developed a clear strategic framework, vision and challenging ambitions for the area. The Council's vision, medium-term objectives, corporate and service planning, and its corporate themes, all link to and support the existing community plan and are sustained in the developing new Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS). This includes for example, challenging shared targets for 'all schools to be good schools' and for improving recycling and reducing waste. This consistent and effective strategic framework across partners provides a firm foundation for the delivery of shared ambitions.

- 38 The Council's engagement and communication with the public is effective. Consultation with local people is wide ranging and inclusive. This includes a well run citizen's panel, and through an improving network of Neighbourhood Action Groups and Forums. Information from consultation and community involvement is used to establish ambitions and objectives, such as to inform its plans for the town centre development and the transfer of its housing stock. Ambitions are clearly articulated through good communication with local people. The Council's award winning quarterly newspaper 'Town and Country' is particularly well used in this respect.
- 39 The Council's community leadership is strong, evident and rooted in a strong sense of pride in the area. This has helped it to maintain a clear and consistent thread through ambitions and in the work to develop the Local Area Agreement (LAA) and the SCS. Senior managers and councillors are well regarded and respected, both within and through their strong contribution to the region outside of the Council. The Council is inclusive in its approach and ambitions are based on a shared understanding among partners. Partner organisations see the Council as highly engaging and receptive to new ideas. This ensures that shared ambitions for the area reflect views from a wide spectrum of partner organisations.
- 40 Ambitions are based on a good knowledge of the region and local area and a broad knowledge of the local community and of their needs. It was one of the first councils in the country to establish a community cohesion strategy, in 2004, and this includes clear evidence of the Council understanding local need. The Council is now making good progress in its ethnic profiling work and in plans to use this to help refresh its community cohesion strategy. This knowledge is helping the Council continue to ensure that its ambitions are based on needs.

Prioritisation

- 41 The Council is performing well in this area. Priorities are appropriately focused on local and national issues and address the needs of the local community. Consultation is wide and effective. Clear and robust plans exist to deliver priorities with partners and resources are allocated accordingly. The Council successfully delivers against its priorities and in taking difficult decisions to move resources to priority areas. Its approach to meeting the needs of black and ethnic minority groups is developing as the local population mix changes over time.
- 42 Longer-term priorities for the area are clear within the existing community plan and are being developed effectively in partnership. Priorities are consistent and appropriately focused on local, regional and national issues and reflect the views and needs of the local communities. Working between partners on delivering priorities is good. Partners are prepared to pool and prioritise budgets, for example to deliver children's centres and improvements to children's mental health services and child protection. The LAA provides a clear framework for shared priorities and improving outcomes for local communities.

- 43 Partners in the Bracknell Forest Partnership (BFP) are clear about their roles and are effective. The BFP has a balanced membership drawn from all relevant partners who operate through a clear memorandum of understanding. This helps ensure good partnership working and includes for example an agreement that each partner would not take any action in its own area which undermines the objectives of the SCS. The new SCS is aligned to the development of the new LAA and these are being developed jointly from a robust evidence base. This includes clear criteria and an innovative priorities framework which maps for each partner all priorities in published plans and strategies, consultations and inspections, performance information, stakeholder opinion, key drivers and policy challenges. This effective prioritisation, information sharing and good understanding among partner organisations helps ensure that ambitions are realistic and deliverable.
- 44 The Council is clearly focussed on its priorities and has appropriate procedures in place to review them. This has been helped by its review and reduction of priorities following the May election. Its medium-term objectives have been reviewed, a smaller number of linked corporate themes have been established and the number of priorities reduced. This has improved the Council's focus. The four overarching priorities for the Council for 2008 to 2011 are: 'a town centre fit for the 21st century; protecting and enhancing our environment; promoting health and achievement; and safety and security'. These priorities remain closely linked to the wider ambitions for the area and previous priorities. The Council's overview and scrutiny function provides good challenge to the Council Executive and this has been used effectively to review and maintain focus on priority areas such as in environmental issues and in improving adult social services and health funding.
- 45 The Council has robust strategies in place to deliver its priorities. The Council's longer-term vision and ambition is translated effectively into short and medium-term priorities. Its Annual Report acts as the corporate strategy and sets plans, priorities and objectives for the coming year. It has a high quality Children's and Young People Plan (CYPP) and effective or developing strategies in all key areas including the Local Transport Plan and the Local Development Framework (LDF). This document sets the long-term picture for the Borough to 2026. It is ambitious, for example it prioritises plans for over 11,000 houses by 2026 and identifies new major urban extensions to Bracknell Town which will deliver major new mixed use communities. The Council has made good progress in the LDF and supporting documents and this has been recognised by the Government Office as best practice. The Council's longer-term plans provide a good framework for future service planning and delivery.

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- 46** The Council manages and prioritises its budget effectively through its medium-term financial strategy (MTFS). Corporate, financial and service plans are linked and the MTFS is based on sound principles. Appropriate contingency funding is allocated to meet unpredicted demand in priority services and additional resources are reallocated where needed. This has included an additional £640,000 for additional residential placements for children this year and £340,000 for independent foster places for next year. This is important for the Council because in such a small area a small increase in demand has a big impact on the overall service budget. The Council manages this well. Priority areas such as street cleansing and waste disposal have also received additional funding to maintain the high quality of these services in line with local people's wishes.
- 47** The Council maintains good focus on its priorities and to balance its budget. It is now considering options, including restructuring some services and possible reductions in some service areas, to bring its budget into balance in line with its high level priorities. This is being managed effectively based on several options identified from an external review. This means that potentially difficult service decisions remain to be taken by the Council and communicated to the public. However, the Council is well placed and prepared to take these decisions in order to maintain its priority services and keep its budget balanced.
- 48** The Council has delivered against its priorities. It prioritises and delivers good value for money. At the same time it has kept its council tax low - the lowest of any unitary authority. The Council redirects resources to areas of need and areas of under performance. This includes additional investment in adult social services which has led to improvement after a period of poor performance. Additional resources have been diverted to community safety and this is improving the service, for example through increased car park safety and in monitoring and addressing anti-social behaviour. The Council attracts a significant level of external funding to deliver its priorities including £37 million of pathfinder funding to redevelop one of its six secondary schools, and £2 million lottery funding to restore a local park.
- 49** The Council maintains a clear focus on delivering its key priorities and has taken difficult decisions in the past to support this. It has maintained its strong leadership and focus on plans for the town centre and proposals to improve its housing stock. It has worked over a number of years to gain tenant support to transfer the stock to a housing association in February 2008. The Council has dealt effectively with the development constraints arising from the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area. It has also successfully introduced alternate weekly waste collections to increase recycling rates, in the face of considerable local opposition and adverse comment in the local press.

- 50 The focus on delivering priorities in one area is not as strong. The local crime reduction partnership has clear priorities for crime reduction, but its plans and actions to address fear of crime are not always clear or targeted. The CDRP and the Council are aware of the fear of crime levels among local people, but actions to address this are not yet sufficiently focused or targeted specifically at reducing fear of crime. This is important, since fear of crime is a key priority for local people. The CDRP and the Council need to be able to clearly demonstrate that its actions and initiatives result in improvement and impact in this.
- 51 The Council maintains a good knowledge of its communities, in most respects, and its priorities are based on this understanding. Its Customer Contact Strategy has improved access to services and it has a good framework for engagement and consultation with local people. The Council uses a range of regular surveys of residents, a well run citizens' panel and service specific reviews. Consultation is used to inform key strategies and plans such as the Local Development Framework and the housing stock transfer. Engagement with younger and older people is good, constructive and used to inform plans and priorities. A register of consultation ensures that information is shared with partners and across services. This knowledge helps the Council ensure that its priorities are based on needs.
- 52 At this time the Council can not yet be sure that its priorities address all minority needs. Although it is well aware that its communities are changing quickly, and its work to fully understand this is progressing well. The Council has worked effectively with established BME groups such as its Nepalese community and Indian Community Association. This includes positive community work and increased support for Nepalese families which has led to an increased awareness in the community following a serious racial incident at a school. It has also invested in support for children for whom English is a second language. The Council works effectively with the voluntary sector and disabled groups to improve access for disabled people. The area has an increasing number of people from BME communities and the Council in the past has not found it easy to access their views. It has more to do to systematically make contact with and coordinate and analyse the needs of young people, parents and carers from BME communities and the most disadvantaged communities and vulnerable groups. However, the Council's recent consultation with BME groups is positive and a new BME forum is now established. The Council is on track to complete its community mapping work and refresh its community cohesion strategy. This is important in assuring that future services meet all needs.

What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?

Capacity

- 53 The Council is performing well in this area. The Council meets the capacity challenges that it faces as a small unitary council. It has knowledgeable and effective councillors, robust decision-making frameworks and supportive and well trained staff. Scrutiny is effective in challenging and supporting policy development. Delivery is underpinned by effective HR, project management, risk management, procurement and ICT; though some new processes are not yet fully embedded across departments. The Council increases its capacity by effective partnership working. Financial capacity is a key challenge, but the Council is taking the right steps to address this, assisted by a strong focus on value for money. The Council's capacity to ensure a robust approach to equalities and diversity is developing.
- 54 The Council has effective structures for decision-making and maintaining standards of behaviour. The executive receives good quality reports in accordance with a forward plan. All councillors have governance training and a good partnership toolkit establishes a governance framework for partnerships. The Council's Standards Committee is appropriate and effective. Governance structures are also effective. Councillors and senior managers are well briefed, clear about their roles and responsibilities and a high degree of support and trust exists. Executive members provide clear political leadership and have a firm grasp of their portfolios and of wider cross-cutting agendas. A protocol on councillor-officer relationships is well observed. Councillors feel well supported by staff and staff are positive about their dealings with councillors. This helps to provide an effective governance framework to support service delivery.
- 55 Scrutiny capacity to challenge and support the Council's executive is good. It has good officer support and engages actively in the scrutiny of performance and decision-making. It assists policy development, has improved procurement and ICT processes and it is extending its scope to wider community issues. Health scrutiny is established and has successfully challenged local health care provision and funding, for example by challenging and improving transport to a local hospital. The LSP is making plans to embrace the scrutiny provisions of the Police and Criminal Justice Act. Effective scrutiny is particularly important at Bracknell Forest, because the political opposition, although very well briefed and committed, is small.

- 56 The Council is increasing its capacity through good and improving partnership working. The LSP is an effective forum for joint working with local public and voluntary sector agencies in delivering services. The Council successfully engages with and supports the local voluntary sector. Voluntary sector representatives are included in the Council's community cohesion and engagement group and voluntary organisations have good access to council facilities for community events. The Council works closely with the former Berkshire unitary councils, for example through the waste partnership PFI. The Council has a flexible approach to outsourcing services to increase its capacity, for example by outsourcing elements of its leisure services and its highways and street lighting maintenance. It has developed an effective partnership with the private sector to implement its ambitious town centre proposals, though it could still promote wider contact with a powerful local private sector in order to encourage wider benefits for the community from this sector. Effective partnership working adds significantly to the capacity of the Council.
- 57 The Council has effective HR practices. HR is underpinned by appropriate policies and the Council uses biennial staff surveys to understand its workforce. The Council has successfully tackled localised sickness absence problems and actively promotes flexible working. It has reduced its sickness levels to about seven days per person per year, which is well below the average of all councils. Recruitment processes and outcomes have improved and turnover rates are low, with fewer unfilled vacancies over the last year. The Council is working to address low representation of BME and disabled workers within the staff group, - this is improving although remains a challenge. Apart from in some discrete service areas longer-term workforce planning is under developed. The Council has an effective children's services workforce strategy but has not yet established longer-term corporate workforce plans to match its own and partners' future vision for services. This will help ensure that its workforce meets future service needs and capacity challenges.
- 58 Training and development is used effectively to improve staff and councillor capacity. The Council is laying good foundations for councillor development and councillors are well trained and knowledgeable. Training is well resourced and delivered through a new central training and development team. Staff training is planned and evaluated through personal development plans (PDPs) and appraisals. The Council is investing in member development and were the first Council in the South East to obtain the Charter for Member Development (2006). It is now making good progress in introducing PDPs for all councillors. Staff and councillors are positive about training opportunities and training is used effectively to increase skills, knowledge and capacity.

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- 59** Service delivery is supported by satisfactory project and risk management processes. The Council is improving these and has recently implemented new project management arrangements and increased its capacity by training and using external expertise. It has addressed recommendations in a recent Audit Commission report on its ICT project management. However, corporate mechanisms for coordinating projects and new risk management arrangements are still bedding in. A revised risk management strategy (2006) is resulting in clearer responsibilities, improved training and a more structured review of risks. This is still work in progress and corporate mechanisms for sharing project and risk information are not fully effective. As a result learning opportunities across services may not be taken and interdependencies across projects may not be picked up.
- 60** The Council has a firm basis for effective procurement and its capacity in this is developing. Procurement is overseen by a strategic group, and supported by a central team and effective strategy. The Council has a broad view of procurement which includes cost, quality and sustainability, with regular analysis of spend and review of contracts. It is developing markets and improved supplier capacity in areas such as social care. Joint working is improving through a Berkshire Procurement and Shared Services Unit and innovative procurement in for example e-auctions and e-invoicing. This helps the Council make effective use of its resources and has helped ensure that it is on track to achieve its procurement savings target of £370,000 over two years.
- 61** The Council's ICT capacity is good. It provides good ICT support to staff and partners. Staff and councillors have good access to ICT and remote access to the Council's network to facilitate flexible working. Some partners have access to the council network to share information, for example the Community Mental Health Team can easily access council held information and vice versa. The Council's external website and its internal intranet are good. This improves access for customers and for council staff when accessing information to serve customers.
- 62** The Council has a good track record in managing its financial capacity but this remains a key and constant challenge. Finances are well managed and the Council has commissioned external advice on potential service realignments and efficiency savings. The Council's executive is now considering this in its budget setting process. Effective budget monitoring is helping to address potential overspends and the proposed housing stock transfer will provide additional capacity in the transition. It is now developing clear plans to address current budget constraints, supported by close financial management. Growth in demand led services, such as Looked after Children, have placed significant stress on the Council's resources and its financial reserves are now approaching what it judges to be the lowest acceptable level. The Council proposes to reduce its £66.9 million revenue budget by over £6 million within three years and it has developed a strategy to achieve this.

- 63** The Council has a strong focus on value for money, heightened by the need to meet savings targets. The Audit Commission's annual use of resources assessment shows that the Council performs well in this area. The Council has made a total of £2.3 million efficiency savings over the past three years and has clear plans to deliver improved value for money through reviews, procurement, new business processes and reduced transaction costs. It is currently restructuring primarily to refocus its services but also to reduce management and support costs. The Council has a proactive approach to external funding opportunities and the bulk of the Council's £25 million capital programme is externally funded. The Council successfully uses planning agreements with developers to improve community infrastructure. This helps it to maintain services in the face of competing demands for resources.
- 64** The Council provides good access to services based on identified need. Its Customer Contact Strategy includes a good range of access methods and transaction costs are low. Customers have good access to services through the website, digital TV, telephone arrangements, Smartcard technology and welcoming reception areas. A high percentage of services are being delivered electronically. This helps the Council achieve high customer satisfaction.
- 65** The Council's approach to addressing equalities and diversity is improving, although areas remain to be addressed. It is developing its understanding of the needs of its increasingly diverse community and has good data on this through its work on housing, local labour markets and through its community cohesion strategy. Diversity training has been effective and councillors act as champions for particular client groups. Disability access to Council buildings is not good enough but improving, two years ago only 26 per cent of its buildings were compliant; this is now 50 per cent with plans to achieve 66 per cent by next year. The Council has an equalities scheme in place, and is preparing equality impact assessments to identify service gaps, but these are not complete. This places the Council at only Level 2 of the Equalities Standard for Local Government. This is important in raising awareness and for dealing with equality, diversity, race, gender and disability across the Council.

Performance management

- 66** The Council is performing well in this area . Performance management is effective and a strong commitment to it is in place across the Council. This is based on an effective framework and system which supports service improvement in priority areas and underpins an established performance culture. Overview and scrutiny is good and performance is challenged rigorously. Resource management and performance management is integrated within the Council. Performance monitoring is good overall, but is hindered in some cases within children's services, by limited performance data. Performance management of partnership work is effective overall. The Council uses external challenge and benchmarking to drive improvement and it communicates well its performance to staff and local people.

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- 67** The Council's performance management framework is clear and well communicated. It makes strong links between corporate and service performance and provides staff with a coherent and consistent set of standards, templates and tools to manage service and staff performance. This is reinforced by a performance coordination group which effectively monitors and reports performance. Performance management is based on good data collection, monitoring and reporting. The Council coordinates the different departmental methods of data collection - some electronic and some paper based - into a consistent corporate system. Whilst this is effective in its operation, the Council acknowledges that greater efficiency could be achieved by all data being managed electronically. It is currently working with a partner organisation to improve this.
- 68** Performance monitoring is good overall and supports the performance management of the Council's priorities. Performance management is robust and performance is reported regularly and consistently using clear reports supported by comprehensive and detailed data analysis. The Corporate Management Team reviews performance monthly, directorate teams weekly and cabinet and overview and scrutiny quarterly. Reports include information on BVPIs, local PIs and targets. As a result the Council can quickly identify poor performance and act on it.
- 69** Financial and service planning is good. The Council's service and financial plans are closely linked. Most action plans and targets are SMART, but this is not universal. For example, the procurement plan and its progress statement are not SMART. Otherwise, the quality of business and service plans is good. Plans are consistent, follow a corporate framework, and are easy to read with clear links between corporate, service and individual objectives. This integration gives the Council a good basis for service and financial planning.
- 70** The Council's staff appraisal process is good and is a clear and important thread in the Council's performance management system. The appraisal process includes clear staff targets linked to service plans. However, appraisal take up varies across the Council. Although latest figures indicate that 90 per cent of staff are appraised, in some services this is as low as 70 per cent. This means that some managers and staff may not know how effectively they contribute to service and corporate priorities.
- 71** Councillors effectively challenge weaker performance. The Council's overview and scrutiny function is effective in challenging the performance of the Council's executive. Councillors receive regular good quality performance reports. Additionally, portfolio holders have regular informal meetings with Directors where they are briefed on current service performance issues. Councillors correct under performance by reallocating resources - such as in education where the overall achievement of school pupils has improved, in adult social care, where its former poor performance and weak performance management are now good. Performance management and scrutiny has also led to improvements in environmental services and libraries. This effective challenge leads to improved performance in key areas.

- 72** The performance management of the LAA and LSP is good. An effective handbook is used to support partners. The Bracknell Forest Partnership is clearly accountable and has shared performance monitoring arrangements with some partners. Data collection is widespread and partnerships are developing better systems integration for monitoring performance. Although this is still work in progress, it will eventually be supported by a new overarching performance management framework and plans for this are progressing well. In other partnerships performance management is variable. Some performance frameworks within partnerships are still under development, but making good progress. For example, the Local Safeguarding Children's Board is developing a performance framework which draws on a wide range of indicators, to assess safeguarding practice across all partner agencies. Good performance management of partnerships leads to better outcomes for local people.
- 73** The Council has effective arrangements in place to monitor and respond to customer complaints and comments. It has responded well to comments from neighbourhood forums and action groups on improving engagement. Complaints about traffic congestion led to the Council setting up a business travel forum and this has resulted in an increase in vehicle sharing. The Council has many mechanisms for bringing together and sharing information gained from service users, but systems to ensure that this is used in business and service planning are less developed. This is important in driving improvement within and across services.
- 74** The Council communicates its performance well. Staff are well briefed and use an easily accessible intranet - BORIS - where clear performance data and reports are available through a dedicated area on performance management. Local people are kept abreast of the Council's performance through effective communication, including the Council's quarterly newspaper.
- 75** External challenge is used effectively to drive improvement. The Council uses external consultants appropriately. This includes a recent efficiency review, done by an external company, which included financial and service benchmarking and this has helped the Council challenge its own performance. The Council encourages challenge through its network of neighbourhood forums/action groups. The overview and scrutiny committee has met in local venues to stimulate interest and this has increased public access and participation.

What has been achieved?

- 76 The Council is performing well in this area . The Council's local priorities clearly relate to national and shared priorities and it can show significant achievement in its priority areas. It has a history of achievement in most services and in improving its weaker service areas, although it does not yet fully address its own sustainability. It maximises its small capacity considerably through effective partnership working to deliver services that improve the quality of life for local people. Its achievements range from national and regional issues - addressing the growth agenda and need for affordable housing - to meeting the needs of local residents, where 72 per cent of local people believe that the Council is making the local area a better place to live. Customer satisfaction with Council services remains above average when compared to other councils nationally.
- 77 The Council has achieved improvement or maintained high quality services in national priority areas and areas of concern to local people. Achievement, as demonstrated by national performance indicators, is good. The Council is ranked 28th out of 388 (all authorities for which data is available) for the percentage of BVPIs that have improved in the last three years (71 per cent of BVPIs have improved in the last three years which is above the average range for all single tier authorities at 60.8 0 63.2 per cent). The Council's services compare well to other councils, more than a third of the Council's BVPIs indicate top performance, this is above average when compared to other councils.
- 78 The Council's contribution to the achievement of shared priorities (between local and central government) is good with positive outcomes in most areas. The Council has a strong focus on promoting sustainable communities and is achieving good outcomes, including in waste management, planning, housing and the management of public spaces. Work is still in progress to fully address its own sustainability in areas such as updating its green travel plan and in reducing its own carbon footprint. The Council is performing well in building safer and stronger communities with crime levels relatively low. The local crime and disorder reduction partnership is refocused and improving. Work to address the relatively high perception of fear of crime is not yet completed. The Council successfully promotes health and wellbeing and its communities are relatively healthy. The independence and wellbeing of older people is addressed and according to a recent assessment by the Commission of Social Care Inspection (CSCI), adult social services have improved and are now delivering good outcomes with promising capacity for further improvement.
- 79 Outcomes for children and young people in Bracknell are good and those most in need benefit from prompt and effective services. The Council and its partners have successfully reduced teenage pregnancy to significantly lower rates than the national average. Educational achievement is good up to age 16 but education, training and employment outcomes for those over 16 are only adequate.

Sustainable communities and transport

- 80 The Council has a strong focus on promoting sustainable communities and is achieving good outcomes. The Council is performing well in several areas, including waste management, planning, in many areas of housing and management of public spaces. The redevelopment of Bracknell Town Centre will deliver a range of sustainability outcomes. The Council is improving its social housing and it is developing plans to improve its own sustainability.
- 81 The Council is intervening positively to address the needs of a buoyant local economy and pockets of disadvantage. It has consulted with local employers and is working to address their priorities, particularly shopping facilities, transportation and labour supply. The Council has made good progress to implement its major town centre scheme, which will bring improved services, jobs, affordable housing and better public transport for local residents. It is initiating skills training to meet the needs of the development and the wider economy. The Council facilitates effective community development through a network of community halls, community groups and its neighbourhood action groups. This is an appropriate level of intervention, given the characteristics of the area.
- 82 The Council is delivering good outcomes for local people from the planning system. It has improved decision-making by restructuring and changes to democratic processes. It has made good progress in its Local Development Framework, Local Transport Plan and supporting policies, well ahead of most councils. It has dealt effectively with the development constraints arising from the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area in order to protect the area and to allow some development. It is now bringing forward good quality housing and other development in accordance with regional guidance. This shows good use of planning powers to meet local needs. The Council has yet to implement some sustainability policies, for example for low energy developments and sustainable drainage schemes.
- 83 The Council is addressing local housing needs effectively. Its new Local Development Framework is providing it with a sound basis for improving its affordable housing performance. It has delivered about 250 affordable homes since 2005 and it has sound proposals to meet its LAA targets by increasing delivery to nearly 300 per year in 2009/10. It has good intelligence on private sector stock condition and vulnerable households and it is providing good support through energy efficiency schemes, a home improvement agency and an equity release scheme run with an adjoining council. It provides effective support to prevent homelessness, integrated across services, and has achieved low levels of acceptances. It has clear plans to secure investment in its own housing stock, through stock transfer. This will enable it to meet the Decent Homes Standard by 2010 and release resources for affordable housing.

- 84 The Council is providing some good sustainable transport outcomes, though significant planned changes are dependant upon the town centre redevelopment. The footpath and cycle path network has been consolidated (4 km of additional combined footpath/cycleway was built in 2006/07) and a programme of small scale highway improvements implemented to improve road safety. School travel plans and safe cycling schemes have been implemented. The Council is establishing a quality bus partnership and working on enhancements, such as real time passenger information. It promotes green travel planning with local employers, though outcomes are not consistently monitored. As a result, cycling, walking and bus use have increased while traffic flows have fallen and congestion has been kept in check. The Council is on target to increase the number of cycling trips by 20 per cent by 2011, bus use increased by 9 per cent in 2006 and the Council can show a 47 per cent reduction in serious road accidents, over the three-year period to 2006. This compares with the performance of the best 25 per cent of councils. Highway maintenance remains a key challenge and the Council as Government supplementary grants decline and the Council does not have long-term plans to address this.
- 85 The Council manages its public spaces well. Standards of street cleanliness compare with those of the best councils, though public satisfaction remains low. The Council supports a number of biodiversity projects and has made substantial investments in its strategic open spaces with lottery funding. This has enabled it to increase their recreational and nature conservation value for example at Lilly Park and Southill Park. Public satisfaction with open spaces and recreational opportunities is high. The Council works effectively to manage pressures on the surrounding Special Protection Area and to free up local development opportunities.
- 86 The Council has worked effectively with the other Berkshire unitary councils to develop its waste management infrastructure and reduce the amount of waste going to landfill. Recycling rates have increased to over 40 per cent, making the Council one of the best performers in the country. Waste minimisation remains a challenge, though the Council has an active education programme and waste levels are falling. Partnership working in waste management is helping the Council to address some of the challenges it faces as a small council. This includes a £611 million joint PFI partnership with two neighbouring councils. This will provide a new household waste recycling centre, materials recovery facility and transfer station and the redevelopment of some existing facilities.
- 87 The Council has recently signed the Nottingham declaration on climate change and it has started to take steps to address its own sustainability. It has waste recycling schemes in council offices. It purchases 'green energy' and it has upgraded heating systems and insulation to improve energy efficiency. This is reducing overall energy use. It has promoted green travel plans in schools and about half the councils schools participate in the ENCAMS eco-schools programme. This addresses recycling and other sustainability issues. The Council's own green travel plan is out of date, however, and it has not developed a comprehensive action plan to reduce its overall carbon footprint. This part of the action planning following the Nottingham Declaration is still work in progress.

Safer and stronger communities

- 88 The Council works effectively with partners in building safer and stronger communities. It has recognised this as a key priority for local people and invested resources to support and improve it. Crime levels are relatively low, although the fear of crime remains disproportionately high. Partnership working to build safer and stronger communities has improved and the crime and disorder reduction partnership (CDRP) is effective.
- 89 The local CDRP is well lead and effectively managed. The Council's Chief Executive took over the chair of CDRP in January 2007. Its performance, leadership and impact had been poor under a previous chair and its weak performance management had been highlighted by the Government Office. Since January 2007, performance and reporting procedures have improved and the CDRP is now more effective. It is well led, appropriately structured with good support and commitment from all key partners. Partnership working to reduce crime is now strong and effective.
- 90 The CDRPs performance in reducing crime is good within the Thames Valley context, but not as strong when compared to other similar CDRP areas. However, the actual number of crimes in Bracknell Forest is low when compared nationally and regionally. Between 2005/06 and 2006/07 the area had an increase in overall crime figures. In the past 6 months, there is evidence that this has improved and robberies, burglaries and motor vehicle crime have reduced back to the previous low levels. In November 2007, overall crime rates have fallen since 2006 by 18 per cent, against an already low number. Targeted initiatives to address issues such as anti-social motor cycle use, knife crime, improving car security and in improving the engagement of young people, along with closer neighbourhood and community policing, have been effective. Bracknell Forest is a relatively safe place to live. This has been achieved by effective partnership working and targeting of resources.
- 91 The Council and the CDRP have not been successful in reducing the fear of crime. It has good knowledge about fear of crime and sets targets to reduce it, but action to achieve this is not always clear or targeted. Its surveys and research work indicate that the fear of crime is too high in relation to the low crime in the area. Local people indicate that 'level of crime' is the most important issue for them, but also feel that it is not the issue most in need of improvement in the area. Despite this, and the low crime rates, 57 per cent of locals report that they are 'very or fairly worried' about becoming a victim of crime. The Council and the CDRP is working to address this. It has a constructive relationship with the local press and works well to publicise positive news on community safety. It identifies 'hot spots' and police visibility is higher in these areas. A perception of crime sub-group is in place within the CDRP, but planning and delivery is not yet coordinated or performance managed to reduce the fear of crime.

- 92 The Council and the CDRP has an appropriate focus and organisation and it deals effectively with anti-social behaviour (ASB). This includes an ASB strategy and effective partnership working. Action is leading to reduced ASB, this includes careful implementation of ASB orders and acceptable behaviour contracts (ABCs). The Council uses an effective system in partnership with the police and parish/town councils to monitor ASB and to target actions. This records and helps analyse and resolve community nuisance and disorder such as abandoned vehicles, motorcycle nuisance, needle finds, broken glass reports, hoax fire reports, vandalism, noise, speeding and fly tipping. As a result the Council is able to target its action and initiatives appropriately.
- 93 The Council and partners have an appropriate focus on drugs and alcohol. The Drug and Alcohol Action Team (DAAT) is delivering positive outcomes and drugs and alcohol misuse is below the national average. An effective multi-agency treatment centre provides good support and advice services - including preventative work with schools and young adults. Between 2005 and 2007 clients accessing treatment rose by 86 per cent and in 2006/07, 74 per cent of clients were retained for 12 weeks or more. The Adult Drug Treatment Plan 2007/08 represents a comprehensive strategy for treatment and aftercare.
- 94 The Council's performance against its own targets for reducing road casualties is mixed, although actual numbers of road casualties are comparatively low when compared nationally. In 2006/07 the Council's targets to reduce the number of people killed or seriously injured in road traffic collisions by 8 per cent was not achieved and 62 people were killed or seriously injured against a target of 32. However, this follows a sustained long-term reduction up until 2006 and action is now being taken to analyse and address the recent upturn.
- 95 The Council has an effective business continuity plan and an effective emergency plan based on risk. It participates fully with partners and neighbours through the Berkshire Emergency Planning Structure, an Emergency Planning Group and the Berkshire Regional Continuity Forum.
- 96 The Council works to build stronger communities, but this is not complete in all areas. It has a good knowledge of its communities and is developing an integrated approach to social inclusion through its community cohesion strategy. However, data on the BME community is not yet detailed enough to target specific needs and work to map and better understand the needs of BME community is still work in progress.

Healthier communities

- 97 Promoting health and wellbeing is embedded as a mainstream Council activity and priority. Departmental service plans set out the actions being taken and the Council has a range of initiatives and good capacity to promote healthier communities. The recent assessment by the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) rated the Council's adult social services as providing 'excellent' outcomes in health and emotional wellbeing.

- 98 The Council's approach to promoting healthier communities is good. It focuses on wide-ranging measures to enable residents to pursue healthy lifestyles and to maintain good levels of health. The Council promotes access to a range of physical recreation opportunities and is making good progress on its LAA targets on exercise and Healthy Schools. This preventative approach is effective, valued and seen as complementary by health partners. Life expectancy and mortality rates in the Borough are improving. A public health consultant works part-time for the Council, strengthening further the integration of health issues and Council services.
- 99 The Council is improving health and wellbeing outcomes including for its most vulnerable groups. This includes targeted initiatives such as a successful exercise referral scheme; a scheme to promote competitive sports amongst school children; good advice to older people on how to stay healthy and free from accidents and smoking reduction measures. A wellbeing leisure team has supported almost 1,500 additional people to take up exercise or leisure activities (October 2006 to July 2007) and an e+smart card allows them to easily purchase a range of activities. The Council performs very well in reducing teenage pregnancies - the rate in 2006/07 was reduced by 40.7 per cent, against a target of 20.6 per cent. The Council's children and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) approach is well developed. The Supporting People service, with partners, meets the needs of teenage parents and young people unable to live with their parents and is applying systematic data sharing to target those most at risk of fuel poverty. This helps improve the basic living conditions for healthier communities.
- 100 The Council is taking a systematic approach to promoting healthier communities. A Health and Wellbeing strategy has been developed with partners. This includes good analysis of health needs, of existing and future contributions to health and wellbeing and sets a firm foundation for future health impact assessments and decision-making. Arrangements for performance management are clear within the strategy. The strategy will be further developed and targeted in light of the findings of a joint strategic needs assessment being undertaken with the PCT. The Council takes a targeted approach to reducing health inequalities. The most deprived wards in terms of health needs have been identified and are now the focus of specific work, including on healthy eating, smoking, and exercise. These arrangements enable the Council and its partners to target activities more systematically and based on identified needs.
- 101 The Council has improved access to health services for groups at risk. It has increased access to physical recreation opportunities for adults with learning disabilities and take-up is high. Physical health checks and advice for people with learning disabilities and users of the Mental Health service are provided. The Council has incorporated health issues in its arrangements to engage with young people who are not in education, employment or training. The town centre 'NRG' scheme, run in partnership with other agencies, received over 200 young people during 2006/07, including those wanting help with health-related issues. These measures enable the Council to engage successfully on health matters with harder to reach teenagers and young adults.

- 102 The Council's Health Overview and Scrutiny Panel takes a robust approach to advocating the interests of local people to NHS partners. The Panel has worked proactively and extensively to increase health funding for the area and to ensure that effective arrangements exist to enable local people to have their say on where and how services are provided. This includes improving transport to a local hospital. This encourages partners to take account of local views in determining access to health services.

Older people

- 103 The Council is performing well in promoting and supporting the independence and wellbeing of older people. The population of Bracknell Forest is relatively healthy and the average life expectancy in Bracknell Forest is high at over 80 years. Although not a stated top priority for the Council, older people's issues are addressed within its current objectives and themes, along with strong links to health and community safety. The recent assessment by the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) rated the Council's adult social services as 'good' overall.
- 104 Through its older people's strategy the Council and partners have developed a comprehensive strategic approach to older people that goes beyond health and social care and the national 'Seven Dimensions of Independence'. This strategy represents an effective targeted approach to older people's services; it includes a clear commissioning strategy and a performance management system to monitor its delivery. The strategy is based on good research and inclusive engagement and this ensures that it reflects residents' needs.
- 105 The Council has good capacity to address older people's issues. It has a co-ordinated cross-service approach and this contributes to improved outcomes and a good range of services, initiatives and activities for older people. This includes its improving adult social services, good leisure and recreation facilities and a wide range of activities and initiatives for older people. It has an effective Executive Portfolio holder for Adult Services, Health, Commissioning and Housing and part of this role is to ensure that older people's needs are addressed across all services. The Council's services and response to older people is based on what older people say they need in their local communities. Positive initiatives and facilities include an active 'silver surfers' organisation, a well used and much appreciated drop-in café for the over 50s, successful intergenerational programmes to bring young and old together, leisure passes for over 50s, home security and safety initiatives and activities such as 'Walking for Health'. This helps ensure that older people have good access to facilities and events and are active and engaged with the Council.

- 106** The Council uses a wide range of methods to ensure it engages fully with older people. This is now inclusive of the 50 to 65 age group, but engagement with BME older people is limited. Consultation is extensive with a range of older people over 50 years of age, not only in existing wider forums, but also through various active older people's groups across the community such as the bi-annual 'Voice of Experience' conference. This consultation leads to improved and changed services, for example, improvements to day centre provision and the re-shaping of dementia services. As a result the Council and its partners are confident that the needs and aspirations of most older people are being met. In particular, the desire of older people to remain as long as possible in their own homes. Work to ensure that this includes older BME people is under developed and this means that the Council can not yet be sure that it is fully meeting their needs.
- 107** Social care initiatives and projects are targeted to meet the needs of older people, including through voluntary and community groups. This includes a review of day care provision, the agreed housing stock transfer which includes planned improvements to sheltered homes and improved routing of buses to the hospitals that serve the Council. A councillor champion for older people holds weekly meetings with a senior citizen's forum and initiatives such as an active home library service, a good range of educational courses and social events and improved internet access for older people have been implemented. Good arrangements are also in place for older people to meet with younger people to ease fears and reduce any friction. The Council and its partners have been successful in reducing the number of delayed transfers of care and in reducing hospital admissions. This helps ensure that older people do not spend unnecessary time in hospital.
- 108** The Council is making good progress towards modernising its services for older people, although this is still work in progress. The Council along with its partners is seeking to ensure that its adult social care services, including those services for older people, are fit for current and future needs. Modernising these services is a key challenge for the Council but recent progress has been good. According to a recent assessment by the Commission of Social Care Inspection (CSCI), Adult Social Services have improved and are now delivering good outcomes with promising capacity for further improvement. A transformation programme is now in place and this is focused on maximising the independence of older people.

Children and young people

- 109** Outcomes for children and young people in Bracknell are good. They are very healthy and benefit from good community support for their mental wellbeing. Comparatively few children and young people are in need of protection plans or come into care. Those most in need benefit from prompt and effective services. Educational achievement is good up to age 16 but the combined outcomes in education, training and employment for those over 16 are only adequate. The great majority of children and young people behave responsibly; many take up the wide variety of opportunities to contribute to their schools and communities. Children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities do well, with effective help in moving on within children's services.
- 110** The management of children's services in Bracknell Forest is good. The senior management team and elected members give very good leadership in expressing the area's strong ambitions for integrated working to improve outcomes. Prioritisation is good and founded well on need, although the council recognises that the intensive analysis commissioned two years ago needs updating in the light of the rapidly changing population. Management and workforce capacity is good, enhanced by innovative recruitment and retention policies for teachers and social workers. Change has been managed well, although progress has been slow in the area of 14 to 19 partnerships. Partners and community sector organisations make an impressive contribution to preventative and family support work. Financial management is effective. Staff supervision is generally effective and purposeful; performance management systems are good and particularly well used in education.
- 111** The high quality Children's and Young People Plan (CYPP) is clearly aligned to corporate strategy and the Local Area Agreement. A robust first year review of the CYPP drives forward the commitment of the council and its partners. There is good progress towards integrated services with key elements of a Children's Trust due to be in place by the target deadline of April 2008. The council has a strong framework for redirecting resources to areas of need and areas of underperformance. With good capacity, robust financial and performance management systems in place, the council has good capacity to continue to improve.
- 112** All services and the 100 per cent of schools on the National Healthy Schools programme make an excellent contribution to the physical and mental health of children and young people through emphasis on prevention and healthy lifestyles. Babies are given a good start in life and levels of infant and child mortality are low. Dental health is very good. The authority has been judged as one of the top three local authorities in the country in reducing teenage pregnancy with significantly lower rates than the national average. The health of looked after children and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is supported very well through specialist services and good access to universal provision.

- 113** Children and young people appear safe. The Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) directs good multi-agency working through its business plans. This is seen in the good practice regarding domestic violence and bullying, including support to the victims of homophobic and racist bullying. Schools and settings where children are cared for provide a safe environment. Road safety is very good. Child protection plans are well managed. Children in care, including the high proportion who are placed in appropriate settings outside the borough, are skilfully supported. The majority are in stable placements although there is more to do in developing foster care for those with complex needs and for some black and minority ethnic children.
- 114** Educational and personal development outcomes are good and most pupils enjoy their school life. Achievement through pre-school and in both primary and secondary schools is good overall. The local authority takes effective action to improve schools. Attendance is good, including that for young people in care. Special educational needs processes are well managed and the Kennel Lane special school outreach services are highly regarded by other schools and parents for their effect on supporting inclusion in mainstream schools. Young people make good progress through involvement in youth work and have access to a good range of leisure facilities.
- 115** The council and its partners take careful account of the views of all groups, although the participation of some groups of black and minority ethnic groups and some children in care is underdeveloped. Much effort is made to ensure those receiving services take part in reviews. There are outstandingly positive effects on behaviour and achievement in schools that have embarked on the UNICEF-sponsored Rights Respecting Agenda. Partners work closely together to target anti-social behaviour effectively. The rate of offending is comparatively low for the region and those who offend get satisfactory help.
- 116** Support for economic wellbeing is good overall, although over-16s are less well served than younger age groups. High quality childcare is widely available. There is good preparation for working life in secondary schools. Provision for young people with learning difficulties is good. Strategies to improve provision for 14 to 19 year-olds are not yet fully taking effect for those over the age of 16. There is still a low range of provision, too little flexibility and too few young people staying in employment, education or training. The comprehensive electronic prospectus is underdeveloped. Information, guidance and housing for vulnerable groups are good and young people are effectively involved in consultation for the regeneration of Bracknell Town Centre.

Appendix 1 – Framework for corporate assessment

- 1 This corporate assessment was carried out under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999, under which the Audit Commission has power to inspect local authorities' arrangements for securing continuous improvement. The results of the corporate assessment contribute to the determination of the overall CPA category for an authority, which the Audit Commission is required to assess and report on under section 99 of the Local Government Act 2003.
- 2 The Council's self-assessment provided a key resource in focusing the assessment activity which included consideration of:
 - key documentation, including the Council's improvement plan;
 - updated performance indicators and performance data; and
 - interviews and meetings attended.
- 3 The assessment for Bracknell Forest Borough Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 15 October to 26 October 2007.
- 4 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.