

Inspection report

July 2004



Comprehensive performance assessment

Huntingdonshire 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.
- 3 The official version of this report is also available on the Audit Commission's web site at www.audit-commission.gov.uk. The Audit Commission cannot verify the accuracy of and is not responsible for material contained in this report which has been reproduced by another organisation or individual.

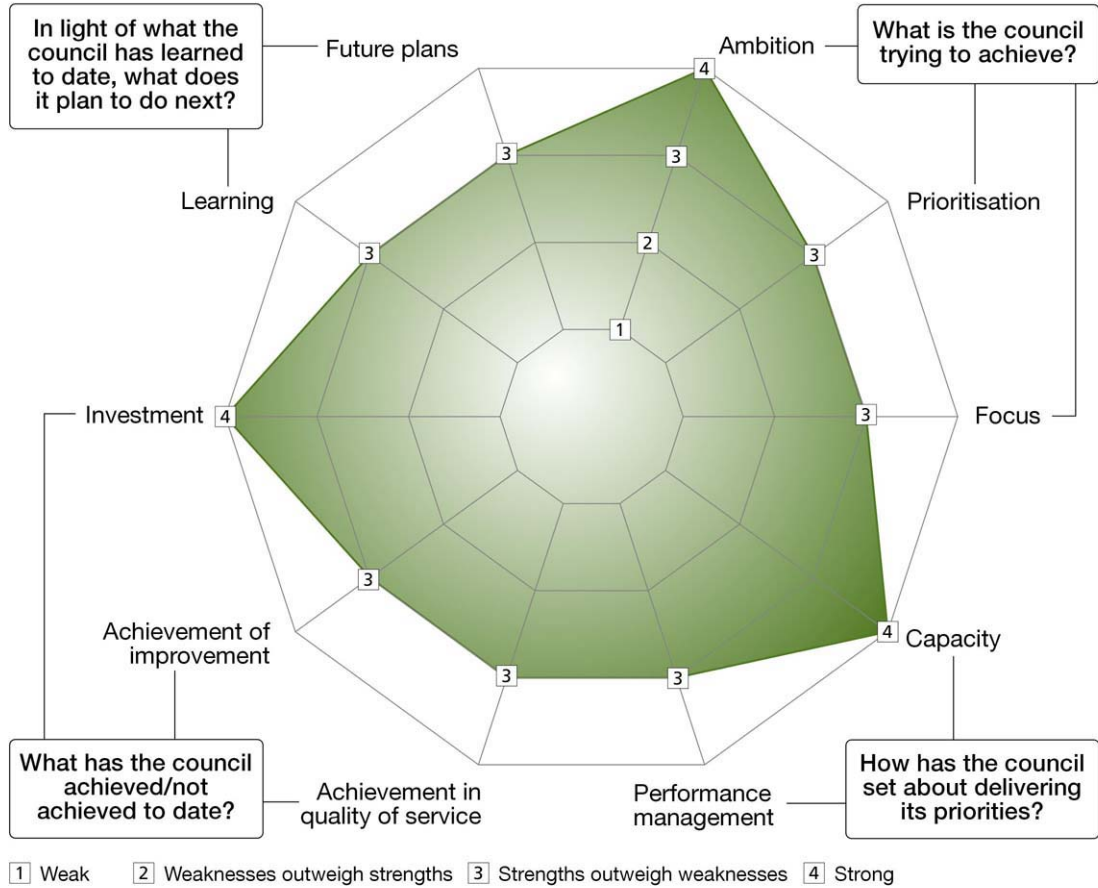
Summary of Comprehensive Performance Assessment judgements

- 4 Huntingdonshire District Council is an excellent and improving council.
- 5 The council provides a good level of front line service and is performing well in priority areas such as waste collection and recycling, housing benefit, development control and the delivery of affordable homes. It has a high level of satisfaction with parks and open spaces and is delivering sustained improvement from this high baseline position.
- 6 While there are service areas where people are receiving a good service, there are areas where performance is or has been below average (although the council is now making progress). These include homelessness, which has more impact on the most vulnerable sections of the community. Overall public satisfaction with the service provided by the council is worse than would be predicted and in the lowest quartile.
- 7 The council's capacity to deliver future improvements is strong; it has been successful in building its internal capacity around people, finance, processes and technology. Further capacity building through partnership working can be demonstrated, in particular in initiatives relating to crime and disorder and in its community partnership working in areas such as "The Oxmoor". This strong culture of initiating and developing partnerships has been consolidated by the establishment of the Huntingdonshire local strategic partnership (HSP).
- 8 The council has challenging and ambitious, yet realistic aims that reflect the needs of the local community. These aims have a sound basis in comprehensive consultation. It has a good awareness of local, sub-regional, regional and national influences. For example, the council has been proactive responding regionally to the pressures for expansion.
- 9 The council has put key building blocks in place to enable future improvements to be made. These include an improved performance management framework, a risk management strategy, effective partnership working within a clear local strategic partnership (LSP) structure. The council has a strong track record for seeking out and obtaining investment from a wide variety of sources. Its finances are sound.
- 10 Policies and strategies that will guide the future work of the council are clear in key areas. For example, the asset management plan and the capital strategy are judged to be good and the housing strategy is considered 'fit for purpose' by the Government Office for the East (GO East).
- 11 Credible plans are in place for all strategically important services. The council has robust future plans and strategies, which set out a sustained focus to achieving the council's ambitions. The council is building on a strong base of service planning and delivery and has identified clear plans for the future.

Summary of assessment scores

Top level question	Theme	Grade	Weighted score
What is the council trying to achieve?	Ambition	4	4
	Prioritisation	3	3
	Focus	3	3
How has the council set about delivering its priorities?	Capacity	4	4
	Performance management	3	3
What has the council achieved/not achieved to date?	Achievement in quality of service	3	9
	Achievement of improvement	3	9
	Investment	4	8
In light of what the council has learned to date, what does it plan to do next?	Learning	3	3
	Future plans	3	3
Weighted score			49
Corporate assessment category			Excellent

Huntingdonshire District Council



Huntingdonshire District Council scored well in ten out of ten of the areas assessed.

Recommendations

- 12 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

- 13 Huntingdonshire is a rural area of nearly 350 sq miles. The population is around 160,000 with half living in the four market towns of Huntingdon, St Neots, St Ives and Ramsey. It is a prosperous area, benefiting from higher than average earnings, low unemployment and crime. Of the population 2.8 per cent come from black and minority ethnic groups (BME). Despite this, there are some hot spots where communities are experiencing higher levels of deprivation including some rural areas but particularly 'The Oxmoor' in Huntingdon.
- 14 Since 1974, the main priority and focus of the district council has been to manage the pressures associated with the rapid and extensive growth in Huntingdonshire. Some 8,000 residential properties have been built in the last decade and a further 6,000 are forecast in the next 10 years. In the same period the population has increased by 15,000 and is forecast to increase to 163,700 by 2011, the number of VAT registered businesses has increased by nearly double the rate for Cambridgeshire as a whole. House prices are amongst the highest in the country, and the demand for housing in the area far outstrips supply. Development pressure in the area is an increasing issue and the council is committed to preserving the unique mix of urban and rural communities in the district.

The council

- 15 In May 2002, the council introduced a new leader/cabinet political management following a pilot of the arrangements during the preceding two years. The political composition was at the time of the inspection; Conservatives 37 of the 53 seats, Liberal Democrats 13, and the Independents three. Following the June elections it is now 40 Conservatives, 10 Liberal Democrats and 2 Independents. The present structure comprises a single party cabinet of eight, chaired by the leader, meeting on a three-weekly cycle.
- 16 The chief executive and three directors form a management team, which meets weekly to consider corporate and strategic issues. A team of heads of service, representing 13 divisions, meet six-weekly with the three corporate directors to consider matters around corporate strategy and service improvement. In 2003/4 the council employed 1,100 staff (including part timers), its net revenue budget was £12.3million and council tax was the fourth lowest in England. The council transferred its housing stock in 2000.
- 17 The council along with other districts, county council, EEDA and GO East is part of the local 'infrastructure partnership' to deliver the Government's sustainable communities plan in the Cambridge sub region. A local delivery vehicle has been formed with the chair and chief executive to oversee the plan.
- 18 The council carried out, as requested, a scored self assessment for this inspection against each of the corporate assessment themes. The self assessment was informed by a peer review commissioned by the council and undertaken by SOLACE in November 2003. Using the Audit Commission's scoring mechanism the council has assessed itself as 'excellent'.

What is the council trying to achieve?

Ambition

- 19 There are significant strengths with few weaknesses in this area.
- 20 Huntingdonshire District Council is an ambitious council that demonstrates good community leadership, organisational leadership and well developed partnership arrangements. The council has challenging and ambitious yet realistic aims that reflect the needs of the local community; these have been shared with local people and key council partners. The council's ambition in its priorities reflects local context and national drivers.
- 21 The council's ambitions, as expressed in the community strategy, have been determined with partners and through consultation. Consultation has identified the following key challenges: transportation and access; crime and disorder; environment; the impact of major developments; the shortage of affordable housing; the need for town centre improvements; and the demand for more facilities and services. The council's six priorities can be linked to the challenges drawn from this consultation:
- ◆ Safe and active communities.
 - ◆ A healthy population.
 - ◆ A clean, green and attractive environment.
 - ◆ A strong and diverse local economy.
 - ◆ Housing that meets local needs.
 - ◆ Accessible services and transport choices.
- 22 The council's vision is clear and is identified in the corporate plan 'Growing Success' from which the priorities stem. The vision is that 'we make the most of the opportunities that come from growth; local people can realise their potential; we balance our social, economic and environmental needs; and we have a good quality of life'. The vision supports the main themes in the Huntingdonshire community strategy. The corporate plan and the community strategy set targets for up to 10 years. Councillors and officers clearly support the plan and the priorities. There is a link between the six current priorities and the previous 17 which ensures a continuity of purpose.
- 23 To translate the commitments into outcomes that people will notice, the council has a clear set of priorities. These outcomes have measurable and challenging targets. There are ambitions which stretch to medium term, for example waste or economic development as well as for the longer term on for instance the ambitious Great Fen Project, which aims to restore over 3,000 hectares of traditional Fenland between Huntingdon and Peterborough, where the council is a key partner.

- 24 The council has a good record in community leadership and has been effective in working with partners including the county council to deliver some of its strategic aspirations for the district. It has a strong culture of initiating, developing and supporting partnerships: examples include the Cambridgeshire joint waste partnership, a successful crime & disorder reduction partnership and the Cambridge sub-region infrastructure partnership. The establishment of the HSP has helped to consolidate this work since it was established in the spring of 2002. The community strategy is performance-based and focuses on three themes; continued economic success; opportunity for all; and protecting and enhancing our environment.
- 25 The council can demonstrate sustained commitment to longer term community regeneration programmes such as 'The Oxmoor', a residential area of the district. There is evidence of ambition to improve quality of life for example a new health centre. Other examples of how the council is effective at providing external leadership include the CDRP¹ and business consultation. There are clear links between the community strategy and other strategies, service and action plans including the community safety strategy and the action plan for 'The Oxmoor'.

Prioritisation

- 26 There are more strengths than weaknesses in this area.
- 27 Underpinning the council's vision, the priorities for improvement are clear. The council has now reduced the number of priorities to a realistic six. These six priority areas are explicitly linked through the new balanced scorecard approach to managing individual performance. The targets demonstrate a commitment to improvement and are linked to service plans and the community strategy. There are thus measurable targets and objectives underpinning council priorities.
- 28 The council has a clear basis for its priorities and is building on a strong base of service planning and delivery and has identified clear plans for the future. It has focused on areas where it has not achieved improvements to date, including for instance homelessness.
- 29 The council has conducted consultation and pulled together the views of the community to inform priority setting, the budget process and service planning. Examples include affordable housing, quality of design in maintaining the quality of the environment and recycling. The council can thus demonstrate clearly how its priorities are rooted in consultation - particularly with the consistency of the council's vision and the principles of the HSP.
- 30 The council has engaged a full range of stakeholders. A variety of innovative methods have been used to consult and engage young people, this has also involved working in partnership with other agencies including the Cambridgeshire voluntary and paid youth services. Although the BME population is relatively small, the council consults actively with BME and hard to reach groups. For example, the BME housing strategy identified a weakness in the council's understanding of BME related housing issues. The council has funded some research into this, in order to revise the strategy accordingly.

¹ Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership

- 31 The council has a good awareness of local, sub-regional, regional and national influences and is active in trying to preserve the urban-rural balance of the district while responding to the pressures for expansion. It is demonstrating leadership and increasing its capacity by participating in regional and sub regional partnerships formed to influence these issues, for example through the Cambridge sub-region infrastructure partnership. It has responded to national priorities and balances these with local context, an example is the county waste strategy.
- 32 Communication of the council's priorities has not been effective. Only 37 per cent of staff felt that they were kept up to date with what the council is doing and 52 per cent with their own section/divisions information. The council is taking steps to address this in a more systematic way. However, there is very effective external communication of priorities, for example via the CDRP.
- 33 The housing strategy has recently been judged as 'fit for purpose' by GO East and the development of housing strategies and plans has been carried out in partnership with other agencies. For example the homelessness strategy 2004/07 was developed in partnership with Cambridgeshire County Council social services, education department and partners from the health sector.
- 34 Resources are being invested in priorities. This is done via growth bids and efficiency savings. The council has prioritised its capital programme around the six corporate priorities. The council is thus using its resources to help deliver outcomes in priority areas.
- 35 However it is not clear what are non-priority or lower level priorities for the council. The council is relatively wealthy and has not had to identify non-priorities to help balance its budget and thus there is no consensus on this at present. Thus resources have not generally been shifted from lower level or non priorities though there are clear plans for a member led review of the base budget later this year.

Focus

- 36 There are more strengths than weaknesses in this area.
- 37 The council stays focussed on what matters, highlighted by a sustained focus on service delivery. The council has demonstrated over time a focus in delivering generally good services at a low level of council tax, there is no evidence of any distraction from delivering priorities, for example street cleansing where the council has responded positively to maintain the high standards through £250,000 of additional resources over the last three years. The council has mechanisms and tools to allow it to sustain focus, for example performance is monitored quarterly by directorate management teams against service action plan targets, which are linked back to corporate priorities.
- 38 The council uses its systems and process to maintain focus. It has well managed meetings and clear agendas, and clear performance information is used to keep a focus on improvement. The initiatives and developments needed to maintain focus are not new for the council and are sufficiently embedded to demonstrate success. For instance, there are clear arrangements in place for reporting a

basket of performance indicators to scrutiny committee on a monthly basis, for which cabinet portfolio holders are held to account.

- 39 There are some weaknesses in the effectiveness of the scrutiny system in that although there is some good practice for example a clear forward plan, scrutiny agendas are congested given the current volume of business, the forward plan is not thus as focused as it could be on strategic issues. There are however examples of the scrutiny function working innovatively, for example taking on a broad range of issues put forward by parish councils, voluntary organisations and the public, having a stand-alone budget to appoint specialist advisors, taking scrutiny meetings out around the district and having specific training for scrutiny councillors by a local MP experienced in aspects of select committee workings. These innovations have yet to develop into service outcomes.
- 40 The council has displayed the ability to deliver complex projects and maintain service for example new systems have been implemented in revenues and housing benefit without a deterioration in service.

How has the council set about delivering its priorities?

Capacity

- 41 There are significant strengths in this area, and few weaknesses.
- 42 Officers and senior councillors are supported by comprehensive training and development programs. The councillors training program has latterly been targeted at scrutiny and diversity issues, whilst senior officers have recently been involved in change management training ahead of the introduction of the Customer First programme and the implementation of the new performance management framework. This has contributed to the council being re-accredited as an 'Investor in People' in 2003. The clear training and development has led to a good understanding of roles and areas of responsibility throughout the council.
- 43 There is an excellent corporate appraisal scheme which clearly links individual key performance areas (KPAs) to service and corporate priorities and objectives. These appraisals also identify individual training and development need's which are addressed in the following year's training program. A full skills audit is in progress and will be used to inform the future use of staff skills through the 'corporate project toolkit' and to inform longer term training programmes. The most recent staff survey shows that only 15 per cent of staff feel that they are not offered sufficient opportunities for training and development.
- 44 The people strategy provides the high level staffing direction for the council and is supported by a detailed action plan. Whilst the action plan sets out what the council intends to do in terms of people capacity, its targets are not SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound). At the present time, there are still some resource capacity issues to be addressed in the development control service, but this is in the context of a wider national problem and the council being recently awarded a planning delivery grant.
- 45 Financial management is good and financial capacity is sound following the large scale voluntary transfer of council housing stock in March 2000. The significant levels of both revenue and capital reserves (currently £80 million) are being

utilised to support the five year medium term plan (MTP), which aims to deliver service improvements, through growth bids based upon corporate objectives. The basis of the plan is to draw down reserves over a five year period, in order to keep council tax increases to a minimum (average of 5 per cent over the next three years), until reserves reach a prudent baseline position. The council then projects a need to significantly increase council tax though the current rate of council tax is the fourth lowest of all shire districts and the projected rise will be about the national average.

- 46 The council has responded robustly to the new ethical framework. It has delivered training for parish councillors in the area. The council has the appropriate member and officer codes in place. The standards committee is politically balanced with seven district councillors, two representatives of town and parish councils and three independents. There have been no cases of misconduct for investigation to date.
- 47 The asset management plan and capital strategy assessments have been given a 'good' rating reflecting a robust approach to strategic planning. The current council headquarters are however not fit for purpose in terms of meeting customer access requirements and staff needs. This issue is currently under detailed consideration and funding for the outcome of the review is in place.
- 48 Capacity in the council is enhanced by the low levels of staff sickness across the council. Levels have decreased from 8.3 days in 2000/01 to 6.9 days in 2002/03, which is best quartile performance. The staff turnover rate is currently in the third quartile (12.8 per cent in 2001/02), though this figure is distorted by a significantly higher rate within the leisure service (30 per cent). However, the council is managing this higher level of staff turnover and is reviewing this issue, with a view to producing a plan in order to reduce the rate in leisure to around 20 per cent in 2004/05.
- 49 Staff morale is high as evidenced by the results of the 2003 staff survey, for which there was a 74 per cent response rate. Only 21 per cent of staff felt unfulfilled in their job and only 11 per cent felt they did not have a good work/life balance.
- 50 The council's partners confirmed that the commitment to open partnership was genuine and positive. Capacity building through partnership working can be demonstrated, in particularly in initiatives relating to crime and disorder where it is seen as the prime lead in the CDRP. In its community partnership working in areas such as 'The Oxmoor', the council is looking to fund the capital provision of a health and community centre, which the local primary care trust will repay through an annual rent. Such initiatives show that the council is working with partners to build capacity through its enabling role.
- 51 The council approaches external funding in a focused manner and seeks monies that support its priority areas. Recent successful examples of this include the Oxmoor single regeneration budget (£3.8 million) to support the safe and active communities priority, e-procurement pathfinder project (£537,000) to support the provision of all priorities and DEFRA funding for waste recycling (£2.8 million) to support the clean, green and attractive environment priority.
- 52 The council has and will continue to use alternative methods of service delivery. It is currently working on developing a county wide PFI for waste disposal.

- 53 The council's current ICT infrastructure is good. Recent developments include the electronic document processing system and the performance management system. These systems are well supported by a network of IT analysts, who also provide direct assistance to staff and councillors.
- 54 An equality strategy is in place. The strategy is applicable to users of council services and the employees who provide them. It is supported by specific schemes to address the statutory regulations for race, disability and gender discrimination. It is endorsed by councillors and is supported by training for staff.

Performance management

- 55 Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area.
- 56 The council actively manages performance and its systems for doing this have had impact. The council's service planning process has linked the medium term objectives to individual service plans and on to key performance areas of individuals. Within services, performance is monitored quarterly by directorate management teams against service action plan targets and individual's appraisals are undertaken annually. There are clear arrangements in place for reporting a basket of performance indicators to scrutiny committee on a monthly basis, for which cabinet portfolio holders are held to account. However, corporately the chief officers management team does not yet commit to a regular review of a 'basket' of performance indicators which cover areas of risk and local priority.
- 57 The current performance management system concentrates on activity and inputs rather than user focused outcomes. This has made it difficult to link performance to the achievement of corporate objectives. The council's performance management framework is currently being significantly improved and is now at the stage where the new framework is being rolled out across the council. There are elements of a performance management culture in place and the council has recognised these shortfalls in the current framework and is addressing identified weaknesses.
- 58 The council is also actively performance monitoring some of its partnership work. This has led the development of a clear performance management framework for the CDRP. This is exemplified by the provision of clear objectives for the police community support officers (PCSOs). The police are developing clear outcome based performance measures aimed at reducing crime and the fear of crime.
- 59 The council's corporate service standards are not well publicised to service users. There are numerous examples of service standards embedded within service plans, but a corporate approach to their publication has not been taken. This means that service users are unclear about the corporate standard of service they should expect and hence when to complain to the council.
- 60 The approach to risk management has been formalised in the last two years, through the development of a risk management strategy, the post of risk management advisor and the establishment of a corporate risk management group. A formal review of risks has been completed and a risk register is in place. As stated in its risk strategy, the council has to decide on the extent to which it is

averse to risk, so that appropriate mitigating actions can be taken. In addition, risk management has yet to be integrated into the service planning framework.

- 61 An example of the council managing risk well is in the way it has developed a piloting methodology for the implementation of major projects. This allows the council to trial a new scheme or system in a representative part of the district or council before full roll-out occurs across the remainder once all issues have been addressed. This has recently been used for the wheeled bin programme, where satisfaction rates in the pilot area increased. This way of working ensures that the council learns through a managed approach to service delivery, ensuring that the end result is to the benefit of service users.
- 62 External auditors have confirmed that financial management is generally sound. One benefit of this is that the council has tended to avoid risky and unnecessary spending. It is now taking a more corporate approach to procurement. A procurement strategy was adopted in July 2002 and updated the following May. A procurement manager was appointed in November 2002 and has been developing the approach to procurement through the strategy. To date this has included the development of framework contracts and the current piloting of procurement cards. This work has resulted in some one-off revenue cost savings and further work to consolidate procurement is underway.
- 63 The council is completing its best value review cycle, having re-evaluated the program to concentrate on cross-cutting issues. Whilst there is evidence of step change in reviews such as waste management, incremental change has been more prevalent. Because of the council's strong financial position, the challenge of making resources work in the best way has not resulted in the significant re-direction of resources from non-priority areas.

What has the council achieved / not achieved to date?

Achievement in quality of service

- 64 There are more strengths than weaknesses in this area.
- 65 For 2002/03, only 42 per cent of national performance indicators (PIs) were above average with 24 per cent in the worst quartile and 20 per cent in the best quartile. The areas where performance has been below average include homelessness, which has more impact on the most vulnerable in the community.
- 66 Overall public satisfaction with the service provided by the council is 61 per cent which after taking deprivation levels into account is worse than would be predicted and in the worst performing quartile. However, unaudited data shows an increase in overall satisfaction to 68 per cent. There is a high public satisfaction with the area as a place to live in a recent survey (March 2003). Eighty five per cent of people surveyed were 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' with their quality of life (2003). Published satisfaction rates with individual services is mixed.
- 67 Despite this, the council provides a generally good level of front line service and is performing well in priority areas such as waste collection and recycling, development control, housing benefit, and the delivery of affordable homes. The council's collection of council tax is in the top 25 per cent, while business rates collection is above average. The council is thus collecting its income effectively and efficiently.

Safe and active communities

- 68 This is a strength as crime in the district is low when compared with other areas of the country. Though the fear of crime is disproportionately high, this also remains relatively low. The council has worked effectively in partnership to deliver the crime and disorder reduction strategy. There are good community safety outcomes for example:
- ◆ all 29 council car parks have 'secure by design' status and offences in these car parks have fallen by 17 per cent on the previous year;
 - ◆ the PCSOs are effectively contributing to a reduction in antisocial behaviour; and
 - ◆ a clear and comprehensive district wide design guide covers such issues as designing out crime.
- 69 In responding to the fear of crime, the council has positively tackled hate crime (racial and homophobic) and domestic violence via its 'open out' project and has focused resources on crime hotspots including working closely with the community board established on 'The Oxmoor'. Fly-tipping, fly-posting and graffiti and abandoned vehicles are removed promptly by the council's contractor.

A healthy population

- 70 The council is strong in this area as it has a good network of leisure centres based around the key towns. These are operated in partnership with the county council and offer good quality facilities. Satisfaction with leisure facilities in 2001 was amongst the top 25 per cent of performers as was satisfaction with parks and open spaces.
- 71 To maintain good public health across the district, the council undertakes an active programme of education and support on food hygiene and health and safety for local businesses. This includes courses for Bengali and Cantonese speakers, and specialist work with the voluntary and charitable sector, including those involved with learning difficulties.

A clean, green and attractive environment

- 72 The delivery of the built environment is a strength for the council. There are many attractive developments in keeping with the nature of the area. In addition, independent surveys have shown a good standard of cleanliness with over 95 per cent of streets now consistently maintained at an acceptable standard. Other strengths include:
- ◆ a recycling rate in 2002/03 of 15 per cent, exceeding its 2003/04 statutory recycling standard a year early and placing the council just outside the best 25 per cent of councils nationally; and
 - ◆ determination of planning applications is already close to or exceeding government targets for 2006. The effectiveness of the planning service was reflected in the recent significant amount of planning delivery grant awarded.

A strong and diverse local economy

- 73 The council has some strengths in this area for example, it has town centre partnerships which are at different stages of development. Examples of outcomes to date include the farmers' market, arts festivals and environmental improvements.
- 74 The council is chairing a partnership with other councils in the Cambridgeshire sub-region to develop a clear and consistent framework for maximising planning gain. This approach has been successfully piloted for a major development near St. Neots. The local plan target of 29 per cent of affordable housing has been agreed and £11.8 million has been secured for a wide range of local improvements.

Housing that meets local needs

- 75 This is generally a strength as the council has a good track record of providing affordable housing and is meeting the structure plan targets - 492 units were delivered in the 3 years to 2002/03. It has made good use of section 106 planning agreements in securing affordable housing.
- 76 The average turnaround time for paying new housing benefit claims is 40 days; this is better than average for payment of benefit to claimants nationally. The BFI

has assessed the service as fair towards good with fair towards good prospects for improvement.

- 77 However there has been some poor performance in housing for example performance on processing homelessness applications and length of stay in bed and breakfast or hostels. The council has reacted to this and has now met the government target to eliminate the use of bed and breakfast accommodation by families by 1st April 2004.

Accessible services and transport choices

- 78 This is a weakness as the council is in the bottom quartile for electronic service access and its current DDA performance is weak with only 6 per cent of council buildings accessible. However according to SOCITM the council's website allows considerable levels of interaction for the public and is rated as very good for a company applying for planning permission, for a single parent on low income and for small business enquiries. There are other strengths in this area, for example the council is:

- ◆ the first in the country to enable on-line submission of planning applications via the national planning portal. The council's system supports this allowing interactive web-based access to the planning service, the monitoring of progress of applications to be tracked as well as collating the public to make comments on particular development proposals; and
- ◆ easy to contact. This can be through council staff, visiting the council offices or by writing, telephoning or e-mail. Information leaflets are available in different languages and there is an effective emergency out-of-hours call service.

Achievement of improvement

- 79 There are more strengths than weaknesses in this area.
- 80 The council's general direction of travel is positive. Of performance indicators 65 per cent had improved between 2001/02 and 2002/03 and in 2003/04 indications are that 50 per cent have improved. This includes areas such as recycling and community safety which are important to local people and are in line with the council's expressed priorities. These are sustained improvements and not necessarily a big shift in terms of quartile position. However it is a strength that performance already at a high base continues to improve, in some cases static or marginally declined performance remains in the best 25 per cent.
- 81 As well as improved PIs, there is improved public satisfaction with services since 2001. Recent indications show significant improvements in refuse collection, street cleansing and recycling, and a smaller improvement in grounds maintenance. There are however some PIs not improving. These are not generally in the council's priority areas.

Safe and active communities

- 82 There has been a significant reduction (un-audited) in crime rates in 2003/04. This includes a reduction in burglary by 15 per cent; criminal damage by 11 per cent; vehicle crime by 8 per cent and violent crime by 5 per cent. Partners in the

CDRP consider that this has been achieved through close working, information sharing and the targeting of resources to combat crime and anti-social behaviour.

- 83 In addressing the fear of crime issue, the council has focused resources on crime hotspots. This has included working closely with the community board established on 'The Oxmoor'. The council has successfully delivered against a number of the objectives for which it is responsible within the CDRP and this has contributed to the reported fall in crime rate in the current year. In addition, on 'The Oxmoor' the council provides a popular 'Moor Play' facility which is a play and learning resource for the under fives and their parents or carers.

A healthy population

- 84 Attendance at leisure centres rose between 2001/02 and 2002/03, including an increase in the numbers of members over 60 years of age. The council has updated and refreshed facilities at the centres and indications are that satisfaction with leisure, arts provision, parks and open spaces is improving.
- 85 The council has taken an effective approach to provide activities for hard-to-reach groups of young people. These successful and popular activities have been effective at reducing vandalism that had previously been experienced.

A clean, green and attractive environment

- 86 Since January 2003 the council has piloted a very successful fortnightly collection service of garden waste, dry recyclables and domestic refuse from 9,600 households. This pilot has achieved a recycling rate of 47 per cent (un-audited) and has seen a 15 per cent reduction in the amount of waste disposed to landfill.

A strong and diverse local economy

- 87 This includes the 'vision' for Huntingdon town centre where major improvements are already underway aiming to enhance the vitality of the town through quality, sympathetic, development delivering additional retail facilities and improved public space.

Housing that meets local needs

- 88 There have been improvements in housing for example:
- ◆ over the past 3 years the percentage of empty properties brought back into use has risen from 1.24 per cent to 17.9 per cent and the number of unfit dwellings has been improved from 1.16 per cent to 7.7 per cent over the same period;
 - ◆ since 2001 an increasing number of properties each year have been improved through grant aid, disabled facility grants and home repair assistance have led to 389 disabled persons' properties being adapted; and
 - ◆ the council have introduced a 'rent deposit/rent in advance' scheme to help improve access to private sector tenancies. A mediation service helps young people who have been forced to leave home. A refuge for women provides safe accommodation for those in fear of violence.

- 89 Some housing PIs have not improved including the length of stay in hostel accommodation which remains at 13 weeks, amongst the worst performers. However, the implications of the Homelessness Act 2002 have been recognised and the agreement between the council and the association has been revised to enhance access by the council to accommodation owned by the association in order to house homeless households. This has provided an extra 30 units of accommodation in the past 2 years.

Accessible services and transport choices

- 90 The council has an improved website and the innovative planning portal. It has achieved Beacon status for social inclusion through ICT. Working with the county, it has implemented 10 popular Huntingdonshire E-Learning Points (HELP) in a variety of locations in villages around the district. This is supplemented by the St. Barnabas Community Learning Centre and Crèche in Huntingdon.

Investment

- 91 There are significant strengths with few weaknesses in this area.
- 92 The council has and is putting the key building blocks in place for future service improvements. For example in its new performance management framework where the council is developing a balanced scorecard approach, its developing risk management approach and its well established training and development programmes. The council has made tangible progress on internal building blocks.
- 93 The council's performance management framework is currently being significantly improved. It is building upon a strong commitment to performance management, whilst acknowledging the weaknesses in the current system. The council has identified the need for differing levels of performance management data. It is now at the stage where the new framework is being rolled out across the council. The new framework will use a balanced scorecard to measure corporate and service based performance outcomes against the six priority areas. The links between plans and objectives need to be fully embedded, but is work in progress. Risk management is becoming an integral part of the performance management framework, although it is not yet fully embedded throughout the council. In addition, risk management has yet to be integrated into the service planning framework.
- 94 The council continues to invest in its own ICT infrastructure. Recent developments include the electronic document processing system and the performance management system as well as improvements to the web site. The 'Customer First' programme will further enhance the capacity of the council, through the re-direction of staff resources into direct service provision.
- 95 There are initiatives which show that the council is working with partners to build capacity through its enabling role. In its community partnership working in areas such as 'The Oxmoor', the council is looking to fund the capital provision of a health and community centre, which the local primary care trust will repay through an annual rent. It has also involved the community in the development of its plans. The 'planning for real event' in 2001, involved 300 local residents on 'The Oxmoor' to get their views on the future regeneration scheme for the area.

This led to meetings with a number of different groups including, disability groups and BME community groups. This has led to the proposals receiving SRB funding of £1.4 million.

- 96 The council has been able to identify and allocate key resources for the future within a medium term strategy where growth bids have been aligned to priorities. The council has a strong track record for seeking out and obtaining investment from a wide variety of sources. The external auditor's judgments confirm that the council's finances are sound. The are examples of ensuring adequate resources for the future:
- ◆ As part of the market town transportation strategy the council, in partnership with the county council will deliver a £9 million scheme aimed at delivering a sustainable transport system in and around Huntingdon.
 - ◆ £1.8 million from DEFRA to help fund the extension of the three stream collection service across the whole district this year.
 - ◆ To meet its objectives the council has made significant financial contributions to address antisocial behaviour. This includes a contribution of £330,000 towards the funding of 18 police community support officers (PCSOs), and £120,000 towards a mobile CCTV van.
 - ◆ Good partnership working with young people has been successful in delivering leisure activities. This includes involving young people between the ages of 11 and 20 years in the design and location of a skate park in St Neots. The council contributed £100,000 to the £270,000 scheme.
- 97 The council has made some improvements in procurement. A procurement strategy has been adopted and a procurement manager appointed developing the approach to procurement. The procurement strategy does not embed the use of green procurement practices. There are pockets of green procurement within the council, but the current approach does not fully support corporate priorities.
- 98 The council has little track record of external challenge through inspection, it does however make good use of wide use of consultancy. For example:
- ◆ the transition to the new cabinet system, which was implemented with the help of the Local Government Improvement and Development Agency (IDEA); and
 - ◆ housing need and affordability have been assessed by a district wide survey of housing need completed in July 2003 by external consultants. This updated the previous survey completed in 1998.
- 99 The council has had a good programme of best value reviews which have had an impact for example, in revenues the review led to web-site enhancements and the increased uptake of direct debit as a method of payment. Other examples of improvements following reviews include improvements to the CCTV system and lighting around car parks, a joint waste strategy and garden waste trial and a BME housing strategy.

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

Learning

- 100 Overall, there are more strengths than weaknesses in this area.
- 101 The council's culture is to encourage staff to try new ideas for service provision. The people strategy has an action to 'be an organisation that encourages new ideas and methods and that accepts the balance of risk in getting it wrong'. This is supported by the encouragement of cross-departmental working. The staff survey results evidence this approach as only 13 per cent of staff feel that their views are not listened to.
- 102 The council is aware of its successes and what remains to be achieved. This is dealt with systematically across the council, controlled strongly by senior managers and councillors. For example, through the reviews and updating of the housing strategies, the need to improve partnership working with probation and drug action teams was identified for action.
- 103 The council has sought best practice from other organisations. This is best illustrated in the development of the 'Customer First' program, where a multi-disciplinary team of councillors and officers visited other councils with award winning customer service provisions.
- 104 The council has learnt from its experience and has used this to improve its strategies and plans. In housing it carried out a review of its homelessness service and strategy and as a result has increased the number of self-contained temporary accommodation units through a private sector lease scheme; agreed a hospital discharge protocol with the mental health trust and agreed a protocol with social services. This has enabled the council to meet the government target to eliminate the use of bed and breakfast accommodation by families by 1st April 2004.
- 105 The council effectively uses consultants as a tool for learning. For example, the appointment of consultants to progress the mainstreaming of community safety issues in the council led to an action plan of developments against which progress has been made.
- 106 The council actively learns through the use of its pilot methodology. The recycling pilot learnt from the experience of other councils made in their respective roll-outs and implemented actions to address those key issues. As a result, satisfaction results in the pilot area have increased, showing that the adopted approach is fit to use across the remaining district.
- 107 The council is also keen to share its own experiences with others. Through pathfinder projects, officers have spoken at regional and national events in areas such as E-procurement and have hosted conferences to share learning. This shows self-awareness of success and the ability to continue the learning cycle through others.

- 108 Learning is however not systematically shared across the council. There are examples of officers of different services liaising closely to develop services for example in housing and for the 'Customer First' program, though this is countered by some evidence of departmentalism. In the absence of a formal approach to identify and share learning, there is a possibility that learning opportunities may be lost or mistakes repeated.

Future plans

- 109 Overall there are more strengths than weaknesses in this area.
- 110 The council has robust future plans and strategies, which set out a sustained focus on achieving the council's ambitions. These include the community strategy, community safety strategy and the local plan. The council has developed its asset management plan and capital strategy which are both rated by the government office as 'good'. The council has identified clear plans for the future. It has focused on areas where it has not achieved to date. These issues cover major service issues such as better housing, homelessness and supporting people. The community safety strategy is SMART and has clear aims and targets. Each partner within the CDRP is allocated a lead role for particular actions. The council has clear targets that impact upon crime and disorder.
- 111 A significant problem for the council in delivering its medium term plans is the doubt about the sustainability of all the council's plans. The council has clear and effective plans to manage its finances in the medium to long-term, as detailed in the medium term plan and there is a clear commitment to revisit this plan, through a member led review in autumn 2004. This will assess the ongoing viability of the schemes contained within the current plan. This would appear prudent, given that reserves and the resultant diminishing levels of investment income will reduce over this period, resulting in a significant projected increase to council tax levels in 2008/09. The review will need to ensure the sustainability of the council's capacity to deliver services.
- 112 In addition, the council is planning detailed three yearly budget consultation exercises. The first will inform the 2005/06 budget and will follow an ODPM approved, statistically reliable public perception model. This uses a trade off analysis between levels of service provision and council tax levels. This will provide a robust analysis of local opinion and together with the base budget review, will further inform the MTP process.
- 113 The council is committed to developing its 'Customer First' programme to transform the customer experience in Huntingdonshire. This is intended to deliver improvements in the areas of highest importance to local people - that of customer contact.
- 114 The housing strategy clearly sets out what the housing needs of the area are and the aims and objectives of the council in addressing them. The strategy links to sub-strategies such as those for homelessness, private sector and BME population. It has a realistic view of the resources available and actions that need to be taken to resource its key priorities.
- 115 The local plan gives comprehensive advice and guidance for future housing developments. The plan considers the existing employment opportunities in the

market towns together with good transport and infrastructure facilities when focusing on future housing growth. The plan also prioritises vacant, derelict and underused sites for development as a contribution towards urban regeneration. The plan also recognises that its limitations on land use in rural areas needs to be addressed in partnership with parish councils and other agencies. Detailed development guidance has been produced to a local level, for example the 'Ramsey Gateway' urban design framework, with the aim of addressing development needs in particular communities. Both the local guidance and the 'visions', which have been adopted detailing plans for town centres, have been produced in consultation with the community.

- 116 Service plans are generally clear and target driven, for example the environment service plan is clear with actions for implementation that are likely to reduce the impact of waste on the environment. The plan contains clear targets to increase the participation in kerb-side recycling to meet an overall target for the amount of waste recycled per property. The plan also includes targets for awareness raising together with improving the environmental performance of the council itself.
- 117 The current council headquarters are not fit for purpose in terms of meeting customer access requirements and staff needs and major structural repair work is needed. The council has yet to agree its detailed plans for the future of the council's office headquarters although funding for the outcome of the review is in place. This is becoming a matter of some importance, as investment decisions need to take place about the location of its proposed customer services access centre.
- 118 The council has identified key areas where it needs further detailed knowledge and has plans in place to address these gaps. For example, the BME housing strategy identified a weakness in the council's understanding of BME related housing issues. The council has funded some research into this, in order to revise the strategy accordingly. This is due for completion by October 2004.

Summary of theme scores and strengths / weaknesses

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Ambition	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear vision and priorities • Clear ambition to improve quality of life • Ambitions which stretch to medium and longer term • Ambitions determined with partners and through consultation • Effective at providing external leadership 	
Prioritisation	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear priorities - now reduced to 6 • Priorities are rooted in consultation • Consistency between vision and principles of the LSP • Consulted with hard to reach groups • Responded to national priorities and balances these with local context • Very effective external communication of priorities • Resources have been allocated to priority areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The council has not made explicit choices about what are not priorities and thus not shifted resources from lower level or non priorities • Internal communication of priorities
Focus	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A focus in delivering generally good services • No evidence of distraction from priorities • Well managed meetings and clear agendas • Performance information is used to keep a focus on improvement • The council has displayed the ability to deliver complex projects and maintain service 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some weaknesses in scrutiny

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Capacity	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good training and development • Councillors and officers very clear about their roles • Robust response to the new ethical framework • Good existing financial capacity. Well established MTP/MTFS • Good track record in working with partners to deliver priorities • Some alternative methods of service delivery • Good staff morale, low turnover and sickness rate • Current IT capability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accommodation unsuitable for public access and staff, some structural problems • Lack of SMART targets in people strategy and some minor capacity issues in development control
Performance management	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnership working evaluated and performance managed • Established system of annual performance assessments • Record of effectively managing performance, particularly in front line services • Sound financial management • Improving risk management • Piloting approach helps manage risk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Links between plans and objectives not fully established. New framework - early days in terms of implementation • Developing approach to procurement and VFM • No consistent published corporate service standards
Achievement in quality of service	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generally good level of service - performing well in priority areas • HB service fair to good (BFI) • Good revenues service • Waste performance above target good recycling waste inspection result good • Development control performance good - planning portal innovative • Delivery of affordable homes • Community safety outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some published satisfaction figures (2001) low • Some PIs below average, 42 per cent PIs above average • Some weak areas have impacted on vulnerable people

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Achievement of improvement	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustained improvements • 65 per cent PIs improved to March 2003 • Indications of 50 per cent improvements to 2004 • Improving in priority areas • Indications are that satisfaction figures improving • Cross cutting improvements- Oxmoor • HB service (BFI), fair to good prospects • Revenues Service, some improvements • Waste performance - improvements • Improvements in housing - development design • Some improvements in areas critical to the public. Community safety, PCSOs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some PIs not improving
Investment	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Putting building blocks in place for future service improvements. • Securing internal and external financial resources linked to MTFP. • Partnerships in place and delivering. • Community engagement progress. • Capacity building – Oxmoor. • Performance management framework - developing scorecard approach. • Risk management developing. • Investment and improvements in IT systems and infrastructure. • Established T & D programmes. • Evidence of impact of best value reviews. • Some improvements in procurement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little track record of external challenge - wide use of consultancy

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Learning	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culture encourages staff to try new ideas needs • Many examples of council working with others • Self Awareness - responding in areas where improvements needed • Good record of proactively learning through experience • Established method to pilot/phase/implement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not systematic about sharing learning internally - though there are some examples
Future plans	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key plans in place, corporate plan recently agreed • Clear service plans • MTP established good basis to develop future plans and improve services. This underpins the council's ambitions • Plans to reassess MTP/plans/projects in line with resources • Community Strategy • Community Safety Strategy • Housing strategy / business plan - homelessness strategy supporting people • Local plan • Clear involvement of stakeholders in planning, e.g. Ramsey • Plans anticipate diverse needs - HTR/BME & housing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity to implement all plans - if CT rise to be managed • Detailed project plans for Pathfinder to be agreed - clear on options and timescales

Scoring key:

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

Appendix 1 - Balancing housing markets (BHM) diagnostic assessment

119 The council transferred its housing stock in 2000. Since that date the council has a strategic housing role.

How well does the council understand its housing market and from its understanding has the council developed the right proposals to help balance its housing markets?

120 There is a low risk of service or function failure and/or poor outcomes

121 The council understands the general housing need within the district and has a good understanding of the issues of housing affordability. These have been assessed by a district wide survey of housing need completed in July 2003 by external consultants, this updated the previous survey completed in 1998. Supplementary information has been provided from its general and special needs housing register, the sub-regional housing strategy and its internal research document on private sector housing which includes details on current house prices, rent levels, average earnings and economic activity. The council has also commissioned an under-occupation survey of registered social landlords in the district. As a result, the council has identified the characteristics of its own population and available housing, the role of the sub-region and the major issue which it needs to address which is the lack of affordable housing.

122 The council has developed a number of background research studies to support its future plans and strategies. The urban capacity study produced in April 2003 identifies urban capacity in the district and assesses the potential for additional dwellings up to 2016. It also identifies specific sites with potential for residential development.

123 The housing needs for specific sub groups of the population are less well understood by the council. Key workers needs have been assessed as part of a sub-regional study. The council has identified areas of housing need where it needs further detailed knowledge and has plans in place to address the gaps. The council has agreed a budget of £25,000 to fund research into the needs of the black and minority ethnic population and to revise its strategy - this has been timetabled for completion by October 2004. An action plan has been scoped for the older people strategy. The young people's project has been scoped and will be coordinated through the young person's active involvement strategic partnership, looking specifically at youth homelessness to be completed by October 2004. Studies are also underway to identify the support needs of more marginalised groups such as travellers, those with drug misuse issues and people suffering from domestic violence. Whilst the council is addressing this shortfall in knowledge, at the current time, it cannot be sure that it understands and addresses the specific needs of different sectors of its community.

124 The council has good current information on the condition of its housing stock. The council is completing a 100 per cent external stock condition survey which is 98.5 per cent complete and has identified that the council does not have major concentrations of unfit stock. It has been able to identify a number of properties that are in need of repair and the council is targeting these properties for grant work.

- 125 Development of housing strategies and plans has been carried out in partnership with other agencies. For example the homelessness strategy 2004/07 was developed in partnership with Cambridgeshire County Council social services, education department and Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Mental Health Partnership, Huntingdonshire Primary Care Trust, Job Centre Plus and the learning disability partnership. Such joint working by the council is essential since the cross-cutting nature of homelessness requires inter-agency cooperation if the council is to prevent homelessness and assist and enable those who are homeless to move to permanent accommodation.
- 126 The council has involved the community in the development of its plans. The 'planning for real event' in 2001, involved 300 local residents on 'The Oxmoor' to get their views on the future regeneration scheme for the area. This led to meetings with a number of different groups including, disability groups and BME community groups. This has led to the proposals receiving SRB funding of £1.4 million.
- 127 The council has consulted extensively on its housing and planning strategies and plans. It has done this in a variety of ways including one day seminars for key partners; linking with the County Council on their best value review of their homelessness service, questionnaires to homeless households in hostel and B&B accommodation; private sector landlords forum; community strategy survey to random sample of households; involving users through partnership groups such as learning disabilities, mental health supported housing group and older persons implementation group. Comments received from users of the homelessness service have led to the council working with its partners to provide temporary accommodation in different areas to better meet client needs.
- 128 The council has developed its strategies and plans in close liaison with the community, partners and stakeholders. For example, in advance of the new local plan a key issues exercise involved the delivery of leaflets to every household and business (plus workshops), to parish councils and to specific interest groups including youth groups. Parish councils have also been consulted about identification of sites to accommodate rural exception housing to meet local need within their communities. Such involvement in the preparation of policy or site allocation is important if the council is to ensure housing development meets local need.
- 129 National and regional housing, planning and cross-cutting priorities are referred to within the councils plans and priorities – for example 'supporting people' and 'Decent Homes'. The housing strategy draws from the east of England housing strategy 2003/06 and embraces the government's agenda around 'sustainable communities: building for the future'. Its focus is on working with housing providers on a district and sub-regional basis towards a step-change in housing provision to provide more affordable housing for key workers and homeless families. The council's supplementary planning guidance links to regional and local plans. Links are made to the regional planning guidance for East Anglia to 2016 (2000), Cambridgeshire and Peterborough joint structure plan (2002) and the Huntingdonshire local plan. The housing mix supplementary planning guidance reflects the national priority to secure a better housing mix. Overall housing targets are derived from the structure plan process, taking into account demographic change, economic prospects and the strategic policy objective of

accommodating more of Cambridge's housing needs in the immediate vicinity of Cambridge city.

- 130 The council has a clear commitment to the provision of affordable housing, one of its six priorities. The housing portfolio is held by the deputy leader of the council who has a place in the council's cabinet. There is a dedicated head of housing services. There is a health, housing and social care thematic sub-group of the local strategic partnership. Following from the recent changes in government funding for housing, the council has decided that its own investment in new affordable housing will form one element of an overall strategy for the delivery of affordable housing. The other elements of the strategy will include bids for housing corporation funding and development of affordable housing under the recently negotiated local public service agreement (LPSA).
- 131 The councils overarching aims and objectives are clearly linked to service plans and strategies. Each chapter of the district and sub-region housing strategies have clearly identified priorities. The district housing strategy has a clear action plan, which provides detail on target and timescales, resources, links to council corporate objectives, partnerships delivering services and updates on previous actions and objectives. There are also action plans in the homelessness and private sector housing strategies. The links and consistency between the corporate and service plans and strategies and action plans are important to ensure that the council focuses on and delivers outcomes which address the areas identified as priorities.
- 132 The council has clear priorities for the delivery of its housing service. The housing strategy has identified a number of key aims and objectives with a summary of key priorities to address each. The aims have been informed by the data the council holds on housing stock and need and focus on those areas which have been identified as priorities. There are links to complementary strategies such as the homelessness strategy. There are also a number of sub-plans and policies which relate to specific issues for example empty property policy, BME strategy and fuel poverty strategy. The implications of the Regulatory Reform Act have been recognised by the publication of the housing renewal assistance policy in April 2003. This policy targets funding to the most vulnerable members of the community. The district housing strategy action plan 2004/07 provides progress on priority areas in past strategies and plans. The action plans however, do not all have specific, measurable targets. Without which the council cannot be sure that its actions are resulting in specific outcomes, such as the reduction in the number of persons that are homeless.
- 133 The local plan alteration (2002) has considered the existing employment opportunities in the market towns and good transport and infrastructure facilities when focusing on future housing growth. The plan also prioritises vacant, derelict and underused sites for development which will contribute towards urban regeneration. The plan recognises that its limitations on land use in rural areas needs to be addressed through partnership with parish councils and other agencies.
- 134 The council has set out its priorities for housing growth in line with regional guidance and has given a clear basis for these priorities. The local plan alteration (2002) states that it must make adequate provision by identifying sufficient housing land to conform with the requirement set by the approved 1,995 Cambridgeshire structure plan. The councils target is for at least 1,500 new

affordable homes in the period 1997/06. The council states that it will seek to achieve 29 per cent of the total number of dwellings as affordable housing and it will seek to achieve special needs housing within new development where it is considered justified. The alteration therefore meets the structure plan sustainability target of achieving 60-65 per cent of new houses in the cities and market towns. Up to date guidance on future local development will mean that the council can meet local housing need whilst protecting the environment.

What are the council's actions and what outcomes has it achieved in helping to balance housing markets?

- 135 There is a very low risk of service of function failure and/or poor outcomes
- 136 The council works constructively with its internal and external partners. For example both housing and planning staff were involved in the development of the local plan and housing strategy. Developers and the National House Builders Federation have contributed to local plan inquiry discussions. The council holds development and housing management meetings quarterly with all of its registered social landlord partners. This is important as it co-ordinates the services and advice provided to those seeking housing or proposing new housing.
- 137 The council has sufficient capacity through its staff and members to deliver its housing priorities. There is an executive member for planning strategy and housing who sits on the council's cabinet plus a specialist member input through local plan advisory group and development control panel. The planning and housing departments are well staffed and trained to meet the demands of the service. The council has used consultants to carry out major pieces of work such as the housing needs survey. Appropriate resources and expertise are important if the council is to deliver timely services to its residents as well as the provision of policies which will underpin future decisions to assist the council to meet its priorities and needs of its residents.
- 138 The council is clear what its future housing priorities are and how it will fund these priorities. The council has a track record of securing funding and has averaged around £2.5 million a year in grants to registered social landlords delivering between 100 and 150 affordable homes a year. Following abolition of local authority social housing grant the council unsuccessfully bid for schemes requiring over £7 million of funding from transitional arrangements. In partnership with the council, bids from housing associations have resulted in grant funding for the next two years totalling £6.1million. The council has targeted its own resources to the improvement of the existing housing stock through the provision of private sector renewal grants and disabled facilities grants. The council has successfully secured additional resources in partnership on the 'The Oxmoor' which amount to £.1.4 million SRB and a growth area bid of £3.31 million. In consultation with its registered social landlord partners, the council has looked at the future development options available to it to maximise the number of affordable units it can provide including negotiating a local public service agreement with the county council. Whilst future funding for affordable housing remains uncertain the council has put the right building blocks in place to enable it to meet its future housing priorities.
- 139 There is a constructive working relationship between the council and Huntingdon Housing Partnership. For example – the implications of the Homelessness Act

2002 have been recognised and the agreement between the council and the association has been revised to enhance access by the council to accommodation owned by the association in order to house homeless households. This has provided an extra 30 units of accommodation in the past two years. The council and the association have also worked together on a joint bid to fund a tenancy support worker for ex-offenders. Co-operation between the council and housing associations is important if needs of local people are to be met.

- 140 The council is working effectively with a range of partners and organisations to secure additional expertise or funding. The council, in partnership, has been successful in its bids for additional resources to meet its housing need. It has received £1.4 million SRB funding and £3.31million growth area bid for the Oxmoor regeneration project in partnership with the local community, Huntingdon housing partnership and the PCT, funding for sub-regional key worker research of £ 40,000, a sub-regional housing needs survey of £30,000 and a sub-regional affordable housing delivery plan of £30,000 . Such joint working enables the council to provide services and support to local people which may otherwise be uneconomic for the district to provide alone.
- 141 The council has demonstrated effective leadership to the local community through its planning services. In November 2003 the council came up against strong local opposition to the proposal for a care home for autistic people in a local village. The council decided the application on planning grounds and approved it in spite of the forceful opposition from the local community.
- 142 Through working in partnership with its registered social landlords, the council is putting the right building blocks in place which will enable future improvements in services to homeless people in the area. The council has worked in partnership with local registered social landlords to provide a range of temporary accommodation for homeless people; these arrangements include plans to extend provision in the future if the need arises. For example the council has successfully negotiated for a number of private sector properties to be made available and has used its own finances to build in partnership units of temporary accommodation to house homeless people.
- 143 Success of the councils housing strategy is judged against the council aim of 'ensuring the availability of a range of decent housing to meet local needs'. Firstly, the council has undertaken a number of initiatives to improve the existing private and social housing stock. Since 2001 an increasing number of properties each year have been improved through grant aid, and informal or formal action has also increased. The budget for such grant funding has been increased and grants are being targeted at those in receipt of benefits. There is a home improvement agency providing assistance to those applying for grant aid. Disabled facility grants and home repair assistance has led to 389 disabled persons' properties being adapted. Initiatives such as these are important if needs of the elderly and the most disadvantaged are met.
- 144 In addition, the council is improving the number of unfit or empty private sector dwellings that are returned into occupation or demolished. Over the past three years the percentage of empty properties brought back into use has risen from 1.24 per cent to 17.9 per cent (41) and the number of unfit dwellings made fit has been improved from 1.16 per cent to 7.7 per cent over the same period. This will increase the numbers of properties available to let in the area.

- 145 Secondly, the council has continued to enable the provision of affordable housing through grant funding during the last three years to meet its housing need. The council has enabled the provision of a mix of dwellings (492) of which 21 were shared ownership; 25 homebuy; 54 supported housing and 23 elderly bungalows. Since the abolition of local authority social housing grant last year, the council has made available £386,000 towards the provision of temporary accommodation. The council has provided 84 affordable homes in rural locations in the last three years and have secured funding for a further 12 to be built in 2004/05. The council has changed the policy in the local plan alteration 2002 so that it can now ask for affordable housing as part of all developments in settlements of 3,000 population or less.
- 146 The council is making clear use of section 106 (S106) agreements and there is a policy framework in the local plan alteration. A members S106 advisory group advise the development control panel. There is a new officer in post to co-ordinate the delivery of 106 obligations. The sub-region implementation partnership also has an S106 group. This has led to the council exploring ways of incorporating sustainable energy measures in a major development of the railway at St. Neots. Most affordable housing is built as a result of S106 obligations and is necessarily integrated with owner occupied housing. Having detailed guidance on S106 obligations mean that the council will not miss opportunities to secure as much development contributions for community facilities and environmental works. In addition, such guidance means that developers can see that they are being fairly and consistently treated.
- 147 The council has recognised that the delivery of affordable housing has not generated the number of units required to meet local need. The adoption of supplementary planning guidance has allowed the council to make full use of planning powers to ensure that 29 per cent of appropriate development is in the form of affordable housing. The council is ensuring that new housing developments contain a percentage of affordable homes where appropriate in line with their priority to provide more affordable housing for the area. A private housing development currently in construction includes 29 units of social housing. On 'The Oxmoor', which has already a high concentration of social housing (over 6,000 residents), new developments will include smaller market rented units for which there is currently a shortage.
- 148 The council is ensuring that developments of affordable housing are of a high quality. The council has received national recognition for its housing developments. The 'Mill View' scheme won the Mail on Sunday 'Housing Development of the Year 2003'. The council has won 'Security by Design' awards at Barford Road, a scheme providing 37 affordable houses for rent and 34 extra-care and intermediate care homes. High quality housing is a major contributor to the quality of life of the districts resident.
- 149 The council has not been able to meet the national target of 60 per cent for housing on brownfield (previously developed) sites (38 per cent in 2000/01 and 34 per cent in 2002/03) due to its geographical location. In response, however the council has implemented a number of initiatives to help them achieve the structure plan target of 43 per cent by 2016. These include completion of an urban capacity study; working with landowners and developers; supplementary planning guidance and a comprehensive design guide. By controlling the quality of new development the council balances the need to provide additional housing

whilst ensuring that land is used effectively and the environment of the district is protected for the benefit of residents.

- 150 Thirdly, partnership working to provide integration of housing care and support is being achieved through a variety of initiatives. The council worked in partnership in the development of the Cambridgeshire supporting people strategy, pooling the implementation budgets to form one central supporting people implementation team. The council plays an active strategic role in the multi agency older person's implementation group which is responsible for the implementation of the national service framework for older people. In partnership the council has provided a multi-agency mixed funded very sheltered housing scheme which will include intermediate care provision to enable early releases from hospital.
- 151 The council has also worked in partnership with Huntingdon housing partnership to establish a floating support scheme for existing tenants. In partnership with the young person's project a need was identified for young parents and this led to the development of four units of supported housing for young lone parents. Care leavers assessment involves housing staff working in partnership with social services to provide most suitable housing and avoid crisis situations. A homeless prevention and intentionality protocol with social services and a hospital discharge protocol with the mental health trust also exist, which also links into the supported accommodation panel for clients with mental health issues. Involvement by the council in strategic partnerships ensures the integration of services and enables better provision of services locally.
- 152 Finally, a number of other initiatives have been undertaken. The council have introduced a 'rent deposit/rent in advance' scheme to help improve access to private sector tenancies. The housing services website gives access to a range of information including prospective tenants looking for a home. Young persons housing adviser provides specialist service to this client group including visiting schools in the district. A mediation service helps young people who have been forced to leave home. A refuge for women provides safe accommodation for those in fear of violence. Through its many new initiatives the council is improving its services to those in greatest need in the district and has, as a result, reduced its use of bed and breakfast accommodation to an absolute minimum and has met the governments target.

How well does the council monitor its progress and impact in helping to balance housing markets and how effectively does this feed into future strategies and plans?

- 153 There is a very low risk of service failure.
- 154 The council is effectively monitoring its performance through its management framework including a risk assessment. All strategies have action plans which feed into service plans and individual work plans. Exception reports are discussed with the portfolio holder for housing strategy and all elected members receive a quarterly report. Service plans are monitored on a regular basis. The housing strategy is updated annually. Feedback from service users is monitored through a variety of mechanisms.
- 155 The council has effective systems in place to monitor the current and future balance of housing supply and demand. Progress against structure and local

plan targets is monitored annually in partnership with the county council. Housing needs surveys, district and sub regional, gauge the current and future balance of housing supply and demand. Recent policies and targets are new and have not yet been evaluated. Affordable housing delivery is monitored via the council's grant programme and the housing corporation's information management system.

- 156 The council is aware of its successes and areas for improvement. Through the reviews and updating of its housing strategies and plans it has identified areas for development such as the need to improve partnership working with probation and drug action teams and the significant gap between the need for smaller properties and the high proportion of new homes that comprise large dwellings.
- 157 The council has mechanisms in place to monitor the quality of services provided by its registered social landlord partners. The council meets with all registered social landlords with stock on a quarterly basis to discuss development, policy and other strategic issues. And they meet with the LSVT registered social landlord at six weekly intervals. In addition there is a formal six monthly meeting to monitor progress. Nomination agreements specifying the level of nominations from the council are reviewed annually through the CORE returns. Non-performing registered social landlords are contacted separately to discuss issues.
- 158 The council has learnt from its experience and has used this to improve its strategies and plans. The council carried out a review of its homelessness service and strategy and as a result has increased the number of self-contained temporary accommodation units through a private sector lease scheme; agreed a hospital discharge protocol with the mental health trust and agreed a protocol with social services. This has enabled the council to meet the government target to eliminate the use of bed and breakfast accommodation by families by 1st April 2004.
- 159 The council has learnt from others and has used this to improve its strategies and plans. The head of planning services is regional convenor of the planning officers society. The eastern LSVT group includes sharing benchmarking performance indicators with the south east LSVT group. The council subscribe to the CIH of housing's best practice unit. The council formed an affordable housing sub-group following the government's sustainable communities plan. This is a joint venture involving chief officers from housing authorities, GO-East, the housing corporation and the NHF. It has led to joint ventures including studies into housing needs of key workers and a sub-regional housing strategy. This will enable the council to target future housing provision on the needs of key workers in the district.
- 160 The council has examined the use of its own land and financial resources to implement and delivery its housing strategies. The council has a long term financial strategy and a five year medium term plan. The council has recognised that it has insufficient land to release to meet the need identified in the housing needs survey. The county structure plan targets substantial growth outside of the district. Successful bids received match the requirements of the housing needs survey; £.1.4 million SRB funding and growth area bid of £3.31 million for Oxmoor. Housing is one of the council's key priorities and an affordable housing investment strategy is due to be considered as part of its annual review of medium term spending plans.

Summary of balancing housing markets diagnostic judgements and strengths / weaknesses

Area of focus	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
<p>How well does the council understand its housing market and from its understanding has the council developed the right proposals to help balance its housing markets?</p>	<p>b</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Variety of data used to inform about stock condition and housing need • Recognises implications of sub regional housing market • Range of stakeholders and partners consulted • The plans link together and reflect national and regional priorities • Key areas requiring attention have policies and plans in place to address them • Action plans in place to monitor progress against targets • Thematic sub-group of LSP includes housing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited information on black and minority ethnic groups and some hard to reach – survey planned for 2004 • Some items in the housing strategy action plans are not ‘SMART’ • No internal stock condition survey
<p>What are the council's actions and what outcomes has it achieved in helping to balance housing markets?</p>	<p>a</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal and external partnership working • Using own resources to target improvement of current housing stock through provision of private sector renewal grants and disabled facilities grant • Initiatives in place to deliver rural housing • External resources and expertise being accessed through effective partnership working • External funding secured • Delivery of cross cutting priorities and initiatives achieved through joint working with partners and council • Housing needs being met through a variety of initiatives • Corporate commitment to housing • Track record of investment in affordable housing • Clear financial processes in place for funding housing related priorities • Clear use of section 106 agreements • High quality of recent new builds for affordable housing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Average length of stay in bed and breakfast hasn't improved over the last three years. The council have responded by providing additional units of temporary accommodation, private sector leasing and up to 30 units under a service level agreement with HHP. The council met the government's target to not have any families with children in B&B on the 1st April and now only uses B&B in emergencies

Area of focus	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
<p>How well does the council monitor its progress and impact in helping to balance housing markets and how effectively does this feed into future strategies and plans?</p>	<p>a</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular performance monitoring of housing and planning data • Good monitoring arrangements in place with registered social landlords • The council has learnt from others and has used this to improve its strategies and plans. • The council is addressing areas where it has not achieved what it wanted to • Engagement with RSL partners in planning for the future provision of affordable housing in the district • Involvement in local public service agreement negotiations with county council • Sub-regional partnership – very active • Council producing an ‘investment strategy for affordable housing’ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not all action plans SMART
<p>Balancing housing markets diagnostic assessment judgement</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">A</p>		

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?

- 161 There is very low risk of service or function failure or poor outcomes in this area.
- 162 The council's robust and consistent approach to encouraging quality development and preservation of the natural environment contributes directly to the corporate priority of a 'clean, green and attractive environment'. A clear and comprehensive district wide design guide covers such issues as the use of sustainable materials and designing out crime. This helps ensure that development contributes positively to the local area.
- 163 Detailed and comprehensive development guidance has been produced to a local level, for example the 'Ramsey Gateway' urban design framework, with the aim of addressing development needs in particular communities. Both the local guidance and the 'visions', which have been adopted detailing plans for town centres, have been produced in consultation with the community. This includes the 'vision' for Huntingdon town centre where major improvements are already underway aiming to enhance the vitality of the town through quality, sympathetic, development delivering additional retail facilities and improved public space. As part of the 'market town transportation strategy' the council, in partnership with the county council, will deliver a £9 million scheme aimed at delivering a sustainable transport system in and around Huntingdon. The council is also a key partner on the ambitious Great Fen Project which aims to restore over 3,000 hectares of traditional fenland between Huntingdon and Peterborough.
- 164 Quality development has been secured both in the council's own construction and through the local planning process. The council's new visitors' centre and conference facility at Hinchingsbrooke Country Park is constructed from sustainable materials and is eco-friendly. A significant project funded through a successful bid for £3.8 million of growth area delivery grant, for environmental improvements, demolition and new build is currently being delivered on 'The Oxmoor'.
- 165 The council processes planning applications quickly and is already close to, or exceeding government targets, for 2006. This has, in part, been attributed to a very high level of delegation of decisions to officers. The effectiveness of the service was reflected in the recent significant amount of planning delivery grant awarded. The £521,327 secured is to be used to develop additional site specific development frameworks and further improve customer access to the service.
- 166 The council is effective in providing planning application information to the public. It was the first in the country to enable on-line submission of planning applications via the national planning portal. The council's planning public access system supports this allowing interactive web-based access to the planning service. This popular system allows the progress of applications to be tracked as well as allowing the public to make comments on particular development proposals.
- 167 Significant planning gain has been secured from development in the district. This has included over £700,000 in S106 money in 2003 and the provision of play

areas and public open spaces. The council is chairing a partnership with other councils in the Cambridgeshire sub-region to develop a clear and consistent framework for maximising planning gain including securing contributions towards sub-regional infrastructure. This approach has recently been successfully piloted for a major development near St. Neots. The local plan target of 29 per cent of affordable housing has been agreed and £11.8 million has been secured for a wide range of local improvements including transport in addition to improvements to St. Neots town centre and the provision of significant sporting facilities.

- 168 Effective action is taken to deal with pollution, noise and other nuisances. Clear advice is given and where necessary information is provided in foreign languages through the use of an external translation service. The council is committed to the enforcement concordat and publicises a clear and transparent enforcement policy. Hotlines are provided and are well advertised during campaigns such as to reduce dog fouling and during the roll-out of trial green waste collection service. An effective emergency out-of-hours call service is offered with calls filtered by the councils CCTV monitoring centre. A second stage review and assessment of air quality has been completed concluding that it is generally good, making air quality management areas unnecessary. The resulting assessment was used by DEFRA as a model of good practice.
- 169 The council generally takes more than a local view of environmental issues. The community strategy has a clear target to reduce carbon dioxide emissions and to increase the amount of energy generated from renewable sources. A strategic flood risk assessment of the whole district will be undertaken shortly. Emergency plans are in place in the event of flooding and the CCTV system is used to monitor the height of the river in one particularly flood sensitive location. However the council has not set itself any energy efficiency targets and acknowledges that there has been little progress with the staff travel plan, which was adopted in 1999, and in ensuring a corporate approach to green procurement. The potential relocation of the council offices in Huntingdon has however been seen as the opportunity to address staff travel through the revision and implementation of the staff travel plan.
- 170 Although clear and resourced plans are in place to address the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) the council is unlikely to be compliant by the October 2004 deadline. In 2002/03 the council spent approximately £58,000 improving access to its own buildings and leisure centres and it has made a significant financial commitment over the next five years to address access issues although there are significant access problems associated with the main council office. A community grant scheme is provided to enable improved access in village halls and other community venues. Battery powered vehicles are provided at Hinchingsbrooke Country Park for less able visitors.

Does the council help keep the locality clean?

- 171 There is very low risk of service or function failure or poor outcomes in this area.
- 172 The council has successfully increased the rate of recycling over the last three years contributing to the corporate priority of a 'clean, green and attractive environment'. National indicators for 2002/03 showed it achieved a rate of 15 per cent. This exceeded its 2003/04 statutory recycling standard a year early and placed the council above the median of councils in England. As a member of the

countywide 'Recap' waste and recycling partnership, the council has signed up to achieve collectively tougher targets than the statutory standards.

- 173 Since January 2003 the council has piloted a highly successful fortnightly collection service of garden waste, dry recyclables and domestic refuse from 9,600 households. This pilot has achieved a recycling rate of 47 per cent (un-audited) and has seen a 15 per cent reduction in the amount of waste disposed to landfill. The success of the pilot was in part due to an effective promotion and awareness raising campaign and dedicated, extended hours, telephone hotline for enquiries during implementation. Council surveys indicate that overall satisfaction with the refuse/recycling service has increased in the pilot area since the introduction of the scheme.
- 174 The reported satisfaction with recycling facilities, at 71 per cent, across the whole district, illustrated by 2000/01 national indicators, was good placing the council above the median of councils in England. Indicators for 2002/03 show that, 92 per cent of households had a kerbside recycling collection service of dry recyclables. In addition the council provides, and maintains, to a high standard, 110 'bring' recycling sites thus making recycling accessible to all residents.
- 175 The council has successfully secured £1.8 million from DEFRA to help fund the extension of the three stream collection service across the whole district this year. Comprehensive plans are in place detailing the roll-out including the accompanying promotion and awareness raising campaigns. In addition the council is to trial underground communal recycling banks in those areas where storage of up to three wheeled bins is impractical. The council therefore considers that it will meet and exceed future statutory recycling standards.
- 176 The council has been successful in keeping the amount of waste generated per head low placing the council amongst the best performing in the country. Overall, when reported in 2001/02, the effectiveness of the waste collection service was median when compared to other councils in England; satisfaction however, when measured in 2000/01, was below median.
- 177 The council has a clear and effective approach to street cleaning and has responded positively to maintain the high standards through £250,000 of additional resources over the last three years. A borough wide programme of street cleaning, operating 7 days a week, is maintained with a focus on hot spots for litter. Independent surveys by EnCams (formerly the Tidy Britain Group) have shown that there has been a steady improvement in the standard of cleanliness with over 95 per cent of streets now consistently maintained at an acceptable standard. National indicators show that satisfaction with the standards of cleanliness, when surveyed in 2000/01, was 63 per cent reflecting a median performance when compared to other councils in England. Un-audited data from a survey this year shows that satisfaction is currently at 68 per cent. In addition, in 2000/01 the council had a high level of satisfaction with parks and open spaces, placing the council amongst the best 25 per cent of councils in the country.
- 178 An effective balance has been achieved between education and enforcement to address environmental issues. The dog fouling campaign, supported through a 24 hour hotline, raised awareness through information and promotion and was supported with targeted enforcement. It has resulted in a drop in the number of complaints concerning dog fouling in the last 2 years. A similar campaign has

been undertaken for litter with a focus upon education and awareness raising sessions in schools.

- 179 There is prompt removal of fly-tipping, fly-posting and graffiti. In one subway which was prone to graffiti the council worked in partnership with the county council and the probation service to have a mural painted. This reduces the impact of any subsequent graffiti. In addition the council has had some notable success resolving problems associated with private land where enforcement action has resulted in the council removing waste.
- 180 Abandoned vehicles are promptly removed by the council's contractor. An agreement between the community board on 'The Oxmoor', the land owners, Huntingdonshire housing partnership, and the council has resulted in an enhanced service where the council removes the vehicle on the same day the service is requested. The council reports its performance back to the community board on a quarterly basis.
- 181 The council is easy to contact. Council staff and vehicles are clearly identifiable and staff are encouraged to report problems when they are encountered on the district. The public can report problems directly to them, or visit the council offices or by writing, telephoning or e-mail. Relevant contact numbers are widely publicised and information leaflets are available in different languages.

Does the council work with partners to improve community safety?

- 182 There is very low risk of service or function failure or poor outcomes in this area.
- 183 The council understands clearly the main community safety issues in the district and works closely and effectively in partnership to deliver the crime and disorder reduction strategy. A senior council officer chairs the crime and disorder reduction partnership (CDRP). Its work in this area contributes to the council's corporate priority for a 'safe and active community'. All key partners, including the police, county council and Crown Prosecution Service, highly regard the council's clear leadership and commitment. The crime and disorder reduction strategy contains detailed targets aimed at producing positive outcomes. There are clear links between it and other strategies and action plans including the community strategy and the action plan for 'The Oxmoor'.
- 184 The overall rate of crime in Huntingdonshire in 2002/03 was high in comparison to the family group of similar CDRPs. There has however been a significant reduction in crime rates in 2003/04 (un-audited). This includes a reduction in burglary by 15 per cent; criminal damage by 11 per cent; vehicle crime by 8 per cent and violent crime by 5 per cent. Partners in the CDRP consider that this has been achieved through close working, information sharing and the targeting of resources to combat crime and anti-social behaviour.
- 185 To meet its objectives the council has made significant financial contributions to address antisocial behaviour. This includes a contribution of £330,000 towards the funding of 18 police community support officers (PCSOs), and £120,000 towards a mobile CCTV van. This complements the 108 fixed cameras, covering all the market towns, which are monitored by the council's CCTV control room.
- 186 The council has led the development of a clear performance management framework for the CDRP. This is exemplified by the provision of clear objectives

for the PCSOs, supported by a comprehensive training programme which was delivered by the council. The PCSOs, in place since September 2003, are already effectively contributing to a reduction in antisocial behaviour and are also equipped to deal with environmental issues such as littering and irresponsible dog ownership. The role of the Huntingdonshire Housing Partnership's street wardens' and PCSOs has been closely linked to ensure consistency in the way they deliver services and engage with the public.

- 187 As a result of visual audits, the council has effectively used its own resources, for example from the crime and disorder lighting budget and small scale environmental improvement budget, to undertake minor works such as footpath lighting to improve security. All 29 council car parks have achieved 'secure by design' status and offences in these car parks have fallen by 17 per cent on the previous year. This, together with the council's effective delivery of services, including a robust approach to designing out crime through the planning process, contributes effectively to reducing crime and the fear of crime.
- 188 The council has focused resources on crime hotspots. This has included working closely with the community board established on 'The Oxmoor'. In delivering services the council has drawn upon knowledge from external agencies including the Home Office's neighbour nuisance unit whose advice has led to the council employing two anti-social behaviour case workers. These posts actively support the problem solving groups that have been established to target resources to areas of greatest need.
- 189 Local communities have been actively involved in addressing crime and disorder issues. Reports of nuisance caused by young people gathering in one village led the council to deploy a detached youth worker in order to identify diversionary activities. The young people formed the 'broken circle group' and produced a video highlighting the lack of local facilities, they subsequently presented this to the community safety partnership and are now working together to secure funding for a skate park.
- 190 Good partnership working on a county-wide basis has positively tackled hate crime (racial and homophobic) and domestic violence. The 'open out' project has been established to encourage the reporting of racial and hate crime in confidential and non intimidating environments. The council contributes £6,000 per annum to the county-wide domestic violence project and has allocated capital funding for a recently opened women's refuge in St Neots. The council, through the CDRP, is also focusing upon hotspots of domestic violence in the district as identified by the crime audit.
- 191 The council identified that there was not a consistent approach to recording incidents of anti-social behaviour between different services. Consultants were employed in October 2003 to devise a robust system of information sharing concerning antisocial behaviour. As a result of the findings the council has already made considerable progress against its action plan for comprehensive mainstreaming of crime and disorder issues across each council service. Awareness raising and specific training has been provided to key staff and regular events are held with the PCSOs to integrate their work into mainstream services within the council.

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

- 192 There is very low risk of service or function failure or poor outcomes in this area.
- 193 The council is taking a comprehensive approach to identifying the needs of children and young people in the district. This forms part of the £70,000, three year, young people's active involvement action plan aimed at building services around young people. Providing activities and engaging young people contribute to the corporate priority of a 'safe and active community'. A variety of innovative methods have been used to consult and engage young people, this has also involved working in partnership with other agencies including the Cambridgeshire voluntary and paid youth services.
- 194 The council clearly engages young people to identify their needs at a local level. Young people in one village were involved in the recruitment process for their own detached youth worker, including assisting in writing the job description and taking part in the interview process.
- 195 As part of a broad community consultation exercise about the future of Ramsey, an impressive range of different approaches was employed to obtain the views of young people. This included discussion groups, projects at a local secondary school, a student run 'big brother' diary room and a photography project where primary school children were given disposable cameras and asked to take pictures of what they like or dislike in their local area. The issues raised by the young people are included in the action plan for the town.
- 196 The council has taken an effective approach to provide activities for hard-to-reach groups of young people. This has included park rangers at Hinchbrook Country Park reading stories to the children from an illegal encampment of travellers as well as providing constructive activities for truant children from local schools. These successful and popular activities have been effective at reducing vandalism that had previously been experienced in the park.
- 197 An effective approach has been taken to consulting with young people about local arts provision and the council has clearly acted upon the findings. The project called SPLAT ('smart people like arty things') involved training some young people to act as peer researchers who subsequently interviewed 127 young people to ascertain the barriers to taking part in non sporting activities. The SPLAT group presented their findings to the council's overview and scrutiny panels. As a result film-making and photography projects are to be provided.
- 198 The council is required to produce a licensing strategy and has taken the opportunity to work with the Cambridgeshire Youth Service and discuss issues with teenagers around alcohol, pubs and the night-time economy. Young people who lived in rural areas were provided with paid taxis to meet the youth workers overcoming rural exclusion during the consultation exercise. The issues raised, including concerns about drink spiking, are to be fed directly in to the strategy and the council hopes to work with young people, in providing training sessions for licensees.
- 199 The council has commenced research to explore different ways of approaching and communicating with young people. The Cambridgeshire Council for Voluntary Youth Services is undertaking the work. In addition the council has also

delivered 'bite-size training' to help members and officers understand issues around consulting and engaging young people. The council, with the youth service, has funded an interactive website dedicated to young people, called '4 Youth'. It includes a calendar of forthcoming activities and events in Huntingdonshire and an interactive 'agony aunt' section with questions about sexual health answered by the primary care trust.

- 200 A wide range of good sporting and other activities is provided by the council for young people both after school and in the holidays. Activities are also delivered on an outreach basis so that young people living in rural areas are not excluded. This includes 'Art Attack' where professional artists offer art courses, such as kite making, in various locations. Activity road-shows are also run on an outreach basis in the summer holidays. Some of the activities are subsidised and are provided either by the council or in partnership with other agencies. The council employs a youth sport officer whose work includes going into schools and promoting sporting activities, including the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough 'Heart of the East Youth Games' which the council is hosting for the second consecutive year. Over 300 young people have participated in the active sport programme and coaching courses are also offered to enable more sporting activities to be delivered in the community. Feedback from both those participating and their parents has shown that this has been highly valued.
- 201 Good partnership working with young people has been successful in delivering leisure activities. This includes involving young people between the ages of 11 and 20 years in the design and location of a skate park in St Neots. The council contributed £100,000 to the £270,000 scheme. Young people also helped build a bike track in Hinchingsbrooke Country Park which has been subsequently well used and has resulted in less damage elsewhere in the park.
- 202 Facilities and events are proactively marketed and promoted. The annual budget of £36,500 ensures that every school pupil receives a brochure detailing events in their local community and across Huntingdonshire. The five leisure centres also have a loyalty scheme with young users receiving direct mail shots promoting activities.
- 203 The council is clear that it is responsible for the protection of children and vulnerable adults. The child protection and vulnerable adult policy covers all the main issues and includes guidance on the warning signs of neglect, emotional, physical and sexual abuse. It is also clear about the use of cameras, including mobile phone cameras, in council facilities. The policy is applied routinely to those that have regular contact with children and vulnerable adults, such as those that work in leisure centres, and they are routinely police checked. Agency staff, volunteers and those employed by partners and private contractors are also included in the policy. The council is seeking to extend this to all field officers whom may, even occasionally, come in to contact with individuals who are young or vulnerable.

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?	a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Robust approach ensures protection and enhancement of the natural and built environment • The council is delivering high quality development. It is fast and efficient at determining of planning applications • Significant, comprehensive, planning gains secured • Effective action to address local and more global environmental issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council offices unlikely to be fully DDA compliant by October 2004
Does the council help keep the locality clean?	a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good recycling performance. • Highly successful pilot of three stream waste / recycling collection • Resources and robust plans in place to meet future recycling targets • High customer satisfaction with recycling and parks & open spaces in 2000/01 • Low levels of waste generated • Effective enforcement campaigns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 2000/01 the council reported only median satisfaction with street cleaning and below median satisfaction with waste collection
Does the council work with partners to improve community safety?	a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear community leadership • Un-audited date indicates crime level reducing • Improvement in areas where the council takes the lead • PCSOs, funded by the council, used flexibly and effectively • All council car parks 'secure by design' and have falling crime rates • Effective community engagement in tackling crime and disorder • C&DR issues being effectively mainstreamed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reported crime rates in 2002/03 were comparatively high

Area of focus	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Does the council contribute to activities to positively engage children and young people?	a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Innovative consultation and engagement with children and young people • Wide range of sport and other activities for children and young people • Proactive marketing and promotion of activities • Child protection policy in place 	
Public space diagnostic assessment judgement		A	

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

204 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	3	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	4	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	4	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

205 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

206 Overall, we found that Huntingdonshire's Benefits service was providing a Fair towards Good performance. Huntingdonshire's current performance demonstrates a number of strengths. These include:

- ◆ a range of policies and plans for the Benefits service
- ◆ reporting performance to Members, senior officers and staff
- ◆ effective partnership working with the Department's Counter Fraud Investigation Service
- ◆ meeting the needs of benefits customers in rural areas
- ◆ regular management checking of benefit assessments
- ◆ compliance with the Verification Framework
- ◆ having meetings with landlords
- ◆ well developed post opening arrangements
- ◆ a fraud business plan
- ◆ using all available methods to detect fraud
- ◆ management checking of fraud files at key review stages
- ◆ minimising overpayments by dealing with changes of circumstances promptly.

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

- ◆ introducing a formal process for developing and changing local procedures;
- ◆ reporting the results of all management checks of benefit assessments to senior officers;
- ◆ including targets for personal and telephone callers and for answering correspondence in the Benefits Service Plan;
- ◆ ensuring that all decision letters meet the requirements of the Regulations;

- ◆ further improving performance against all of the main Best Value Performance Indicators;
- ◆ revising the claim form to allow claimants to consent to the provision of information to landlords in direct payment cases;
- ◆ improving the vetting arrangements for new staff;
- ◆ providing feedback to the referrer on the outcome of fraud investigations; and
- ◆ improving the recovery of overpayments.

Proven capacity to improve

208 We assessed Huntingdonshire's proven capacity to improve as **Fair towards Good**. Huntingdonshire was able to demonstrate the following positive aspects:

- ◆ clear links between corporate and service objectives
- ◆ conducting a Best Value review of its Benefits service in 2000
- ◆ reacting positively to the recommendations in the BFI Best Value inspection 2002
- ◆ Members' commitment to achieving top quartile performance
- ◆ increasing resources for the Benefits service
- ◆ conducting a full self-assessment against Performance Standards
- ◆ meeting the needs of benefits customers in rural areas of the district
- ◆ improved performance in 2002/03 for new claims, renewal claims and changes of circumstances.

209 However, the following areas led us to question the extent to which Huntingdonshire was able to demonstrate its capacity to improve:

- ◆ no business continuity plan;
- ◆ not developing waiting time targets for personal and telephone callers as recommended in our Best Value report of 2002; and
- ◆ no target for overpayment recovery included in the Benefits Service Plan.

210 Monitoring of the level and age of HB and CTB debts does not include the debts that have not been invoiced.

Appendix 5 - Framework for Comprehensive Performance Assessment

- 211 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.
- 212 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 balancing housing market;
 - ◆ 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.
- 213 The assessment for Huntingdonshire District Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 29 March to 2 April 2004.
- 214 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.