

Briefing Paper

The Comprehensive Performance Assessment

District Councils – The first results!

July 2003

1. Introduction

The comprehensive performance assessment for district councils uses a 'lighter touch' methodology than was used with the unitary authorities, and centres on two diagnostic models – one for housing and the other for public space, along with assessments of benefits and resources and corporate capacity. This is done through self-assessment. There are two diagnostic models for housing: Balancing Housing Markets, and the Decent Homes Standard. Authorities with stock will focus on the latter while those that have transferred their stock will focus on the former.

The district councils are being assessed through a rolling programme that started with a pilot project in West Sussex and then moved to Cumbria and Devon in June 2003. It will conclude in the summer of 2004. Assessments in the north of England, where the boundary commission is currently considering proposals for local government reorganisation, will be completed by January 2004 so that information on the performance of councils can feed into the boundary commission's deliberations.

The assessment of the corporate and strategic capacity of district councils will consider the ability of the council to:

- Do things pro-actively
- Prioritise and direct resources accordingly
- Balance local and national goals
- Talk to the community
- Reflect and learn

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The diagnostic model for the decent homes standard includes the following themes:

- What is the council trying to achieve in relation to the standard. Does the council know the condition of their housing stock and their compliance with the decent homes standard?
- Is the council delivering its plans to meet the decent homes standard?
- How well does the council monitor its progress and how effectively does this feed into future strategies and plans?

The diagnostic model for balancing housing markets includes the following themes:

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

The diagnostic model for public space includes the following themes:

- How well does the council contribute to the management of the physical environment?
- How does the council help keep the locality clean?
- Does the council work with partners to improve community safety?
- Does the council contribute to activities to positively engage children and young people?

2. The First Results

- 2.1 The first results were declared in West Sussex in July 2003. Chichester and Horsham District Councils both achieved an excellent rating. Chichester District Council was described as having in place the right building blocks to bolster areas of poor performance. Horsham District Council was described as highly ambitious, with clear aims that are the result of extensive consultation – but suffering from a lack of clear prioritisation of actions. Arun District Council was assessed as 'good' as it has a clear understanding of place and works well internally and in partnership, but plans are often not specific enough.

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- 2.2 The remaining district councils in West Sussex: Crawley, Mid Sussex and Worthing, were all assessed as 'fair'. Crawley is considered to have invested soundly in its capacity to deliver improvements, and is ambitious, but has a history of not exploiting its potential. In Mid Sussex, the council's aims and priorities are becoming more focused and based on local consultation. Worthing Borough Council has a balance of strengths and weaknesses and overall is going forward.
- 2.3 These results go some way to allaying fears that district councils would fare badly in the comprehensive performance assessment, thus strengthening arguments for unitary county councils. However, this pattern may not be seen in other parts of England.
- 2.4 Sir Michael Lyons, Director of the Institute of Local Government Studies said that:

"The results might reflect the fact that stable, relatively prosperous communities are likely to have stable, relatively well performing local authorities...(and that this may not be the case where there are) complex and demanding communities."

3. Complex and Demanding Communities in Cumbria and Devon

- 3.1 The next tranche of districts to be assessed – in Cumbria and Devon – include some complex and demanding communities, and while draft reports will not be issued until August and final reports not until September, initial evidence is available in the form of the interim feedback. This suggests that the audit commission has not been as impressed with some authorities in Cumbria and Devon as it has with those in West Sussex.
- 3.2 The final feedback does not include the final assessment, but does include individual scores. In the case of some authorities there is a perception at the council that the inspectors had 'double' and 'triple' counted weaknesses where these could be said to affect more than one of the themes of the assessment. It was also believed that the inspectors had taken too little account of local circumstances and priorities.
- 3.3 In one authority where local challenges are complex and demanding the interim feedback identified the following corporate weaknesses:

Ambition:

- Some ambitions for improving local Quality of Life are vague and few are outcome focused
- Some ambitions are not robust and are unrealistic – though some targets are deliberately aspirational to emphasise the scale of challenge
- A robust framework to achieve the challenging ambitions is not yet complete

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Prioritisation:

- Key corporate and service objectives are not explicitly prioritised – apart from strengthening local economy
- Arrangements to reallocate resources from low priority to high priority areas are not well developed
- Slow response to some national priorities (examples race equality, housing renewal areas)
- Ineffective community consultation mechanisms – particularly for harder-to-reach groups
- Ineffective arrangements to capture and act on feedback

Focus:

- Performance information is not used effectively to maintain focus
- Some inconsistencies between departmental objectives and service priorities
- Initiative and project overload has compromised overall impact and achievement in some areas
- No strategic plans for some key functions

Capacity:

- Staffing capacity continues to be a constraint on service delivery
- Links with some sections of the voluntary and community sectors are under developed
- Mixed success at developing effective partnerships with neighbouring councils, the County Council and Parish Councils
- Resources necessary for service delivery are not explicitly identified
- Some arrangements to maximise internal capacity have not been fully effective (*sickness absence*)
- Access to untapped external resources is limited by staffing constraints (*smaller pots of money*)

Performance Management

- Performance management culture not yet embedded, at officer or councillor level
- Patchy and generally ineffective approach to target-setting and in responding to under-performance
- Performance management is not used systematically to drive improvement in service delivery
- Arrangements to monitor and evaluate Partner contribution are not fully effective
- The range of initiatives and extensive change agenda is putting the budget under pressure
- Access to service standards and compliance is patchy
- Procurement options have not been fully explored

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Quality of Service

- Underperforming against some key PIs, and against some LPs
- Effective strategy development is not always matched by effective execution
- No robust/recent information on customer satisfaction levels
- Lack of coordination across services (example mainstreaming community safety)

Achievement of Improvement

- Unsatisfactory progress in some key areas
- PI performance has deteriorated in some priority areas

Investment

- Insufficient investment available for training and development to deliver the extensive change agenda
- Consultation arrangements are not formalised, with limited coordination to prevent duplication

Learning

- Little tangible evidence of the benefits arising from the learning process
- Limited use of the outcomes from consultation, surveys and feedback
- Limited evaluation of performance and of individual initiatives to inform future delivery

Future Plans

- Future plans and strategies do not always identify the scale and ambition, include clearly prioritised actions, identify clear milestones to monitor progress against
- HR implications are not explicitly considered during strategic planning
- External evaluation of future plans highlights inconsistency in the quality of plans
- Diversity issues are not always addressed within future plans

3.4 The authority was found to have the following weaknesses regarding the decent homes standard:

What is the council trying to achieve in relation to the standard. Does the council know the condition of its housing stock, and its compliance with the decent homes standard?

- Lack of detailed information about which homes are decent
- Plans for improvements are not clearly linked to community safety initiatives
- No up-to-date picture of housing demand due to delayed housing needs survey

Is the Council delivering its plans to meet the decent homes standard?

- The council's own resources will not deliver the decent homes target
- Full range of procurement options have yet to be considered
- Lack of capacity to deliver other initiatives while working on stock transfer

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

- A long-term programme for decent homes work has yet to be developed
- Delivery of performance against key strategies, including the housing strategy, is not routinely reported to or monitored by senior managers
- Lack of linkage between some future plans (*specifically mentioned local plan and housing strategy*)

3.5 The authority was found to have the following weaknesses with regard to public open space:

Does the Council secure a high quality environment through new build and maintenance

- Limited resources and lack of private sector engagements and investment is limiting progress within known areas of need including transport
- Piecemeal approach to improvement schemes sometimes leaves a patchwork of good quality within an area in general need of improvement
- Some public and private hard landscaped areas are overgrown, untidy and badly maintained
- Transport issues are dealt with on an ad-hoc basis and reinvestment is unclear

Does the Council deal effectively with household and other space

- The council does not have a waste strategy
- Traditional working practices and procurement methods do not enable the council to know if it is providing value for money
- The waste service is high cost and a high volume of waste is collected

How effectively is the council cleaning streets and other public areas?

- The council does not keep a record of cleansing standards for public inspection
- Satisfaction surveys are not carried out to monitor improvement or example reductions in the level of littering and dog fouling
- Littering is apparent in some areas because of inadequate work coordination

Does the council provide an effective contribution to the local crime and disorder partnership?

- Ambitions for Community Safety are not realistic and are largely crime focused, rather than on broader community safety issues which can impact on quality of life
- The joint Community Safety Partnership is still at an early stage of development and is not fully effective
- Links with the Local Strategic Partnership and the way in which crime and disorder activities will impact on Community Plan objectives are not clear
- There is a lack of ownership of Community Safety issues at a corporate level
- Community safety is not effectively mainstreamed into the planning and delivery of services

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Has the council (in partnership) been able to secure impact on outcomes as a result of the local community safety work?

- Local crime levels are continuing to increase
- Actions and targets in the community safety strategy 2002-2005 are not realistic and are not being achieved
- No clear prioritisation of community safety issues at a strategic level, which is diluting focus and impact
- No systematic approach to evaluation of strategies and initiatives to ensure learning is identified and limited evidence of impact on quality of life outcomes

Does the Council have a clear idea about the needs of local children and young people

- There are no detailed user profiles to inform service delivery and target non-users
- General satisfaction surveys are not carried out

What is the council doing to secure a range of activities for young people and encourage their positive engagement

- Details of clubs and leisure service providers are not comprehensive
- Data is not used to focus council services on gaps in the market
- There is no evidence of how successful marketing initiatives have been
- Parish councils say the council does not provide well for young people
- Rural transport issues impact on youth access to services although the council does provide some transport to a limited number of events

3.6 While these weaknesses were recorded, the inspectors also found some strengths, in particular that:

- They show strong community leadership
- Their resources are aligned to tackle important local issues
- They are focused on key corporate ambitions
- They increase our capacity through extensive use of partnerships
- Good progress has been made against the key local priority
- They have more effective working relationships within the Council
- They have invested in their people and our processes
- They are open to external challenge
- They learn from good practice within the Council and from others
- Staff/partners/local communities are engaged in planning for the future
- They are prepared to take tough decisions.

4. The Response of the Local Authority

The local authority that received this interim feedback was not satisfied that it reflected accurately upon them and so appealed against some aspects of it.

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They complained that some key strengths listed in their self-assessment appeared to be missing. For example, the fact that Foot & Mouth did not distract them from their focus on regeneration.

They did not disagree with many of the weaknesses identified, particularly concerning the two areas which they themselves had highlighted – prioritisation and performance management. They asked that care be taken to ensure that these issues do not spill over into others. For example – under Focus ‘initiative & project overload’ is likely to be a result of not adequately prioritising objectives.

They had concerns that the Inspection Team had a significant quantity of information to respond to in a short time frame. They felt that some of the issues raised as weaknesses had been adequately dealt with via the information contained in the self-assessments and the supporting documentation supplied during the assessment.

They challenged the conclusion that ‘Some ambitions for improving local quality of life are vague and few are outcome-focused’, and pointed out that the Quality of Life factors that are covered in their 2020 Plan are:

- Job prospects
- Education provision
- Health Services
- Low levels of Crime
- Affordable, decent housing
- Activities for teenagers/community activities/access to culture/sports and leisure facilities
- Low level of pollution
- Clean streets

They maintain that for each of these factors, there are clearly stated outcomes within that Plan. They recognise that in some cases these need to be SMARTer, but believe it is not the case that few are outcome focused.

They contest the conclusion that ‘A robust framework to achieve the challenging ambitions is not yet complete’. They assume that the challenging ambitions are largely in their priority of Economic Regeneration and point to the following as evidence of their achievements at putting a framework in place:

- Urban Regeneration Company
- Rural Regeneration Company
- Commitment in NDA White Paper
- Community Economic Issues included in the Draft Bill
- Joint New Visions Strategy
- Funding for a Delivery Plan/Action Plan with buy in from partners.

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They believe that the conclusion that there are 'No effective community consultation mechanisms' is overly critical. Up until 1998, they carried out a comprehensive bi-annual omnibus survey of residents. This was replaced in 2000 by the statutory omnibus survey. Unfortunately, this has proved much less valuable to them, and they may need to fund both in the future.

In response to the criticism that they have 'No Strategic Plans for some key functions' they point out that they have been criticised in the past for having too many plans, but the Inspection Team raised two specific examples of key functions without strategic plans – transport and waste. They do not consider it necessary to have specific plans for transport, but recognised the need for a Waste Strategy and drafted the document in 2001. This document was not issued at this time, as they were keen to ensure that it was consistent with the County Strategy. The County Council issued their waste strategy in May 2003, and they are now refining their earlier draft to ensure that they have a joined-up strategy for waste.

They challenge the conclusion that there is 'Mixed success at developing effective partnerships with neighbouring councils', as they consider that partnership working with parishes is very positive and productive—although some may be more negative at the present time because of the introduction of parking charges. They think that the judgment of 'mixed success' is based on a 25% return from a questionnaire issued to Parish Councils by the Inspection Team. They feel that this constitutes a small, unrepresentative sample, and that the results may be unfairly skewed. Productive outcomes from their partnership with the Parishes include:

- Assistance in the development of Parish Plans
- Yellow flags /seaside awards for four beaches
- Successes in the Britain in Bloom competitions
- Discussion and progression towards "Quality Parishes"

They claim to have found that while they can point to examples of partnership working with neighbouring councils, some of their efforts have been frustrated by the inability of partners to progress matters at their desired pace. They argue that we should not be the ones to be criticised.

They challenge the conclusion that 'procurement options have not been fully explored' as their procurement strategy requires them to explore all options and they can point to examples where they have used competition, partnerships with the private sector, partnerships with the public and voluntary sectors and other mechanisms to secure best value. They believe that procurement is one of their strengths. They believe that for a council of their size together with their geographical remoteness, they do not have the advantages that other councils may have.

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They complain that the conclusion that 'HR implications are not explicitly considered during strategic planning' has, in some form, been covered a number of times. The fourth point under Capacity. The third point under Focus and the second point under Prioritisation. It also links to the first and last points under Capacity and Performance Management point four. They accept there has been an issue in regard to their ability to prioritise their limited capacity and resources effectively, but believe that this should be reflected only once under prioritisation.

They do not recognise the weakness in public open space that the 'Piecemeal approach to improvement schemes sometimes leaves a patchwork of good quality within an area in general need of improvement'. They argue that there are good reasons why some areas would appear to be "done" and others adjoining not:

- They do not believe that a thin spread of resources over the whole area would be effective. Better to focus, make an impact and comprehensive change. Inevitably areas that have been done will sit next to areas that have not been. The only way around this is to have enough resources to do everything. This is unrealistic.
- In some cases there may be unfinished areas within areas of improvement. This is likely to be due to work not yet being completed.

They deny that 'Transport issues are dealt with on an ad-hoc basis and reinvestment is unclear'. They state that the lack of their own transport strategy does not in any way impact on their focus. Transport issues are incorporated into their 2020 Plan which focuses on transport issues that have the greatest impact on key priorities. The county council have the function of preparing a Local Transport Plan that impacts on their programmes and on Regional Strategy. They input directly into this. They cannot see why the preparation of their own transport strategy should be a priority given:

- They have scarce resources and significant challenges to deal with.
- They need to prioritise and manage their capacity carefully.
- The County Council prepares a statutory Local Transport Plan that they input to.
- They are clear about agreeing their priorities for input to that process with Members.
- Transport related objectives are clear in their 2020 Plan and strongly linked to their key priorities.
- Any strategy they prepared would be their own strategy and would have no legal weight compared to the County's L.T.P.
- The suggested strategy would duplicate the L.T.P.

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They believe that they perform very favourably when compared with their neighbours in terms of the waste service, and dispute that 'The waste collection service is high cost and a high volume of waste is collected'. The amount of waste collected per household is the 3rd lowest of the districts in the county. The amount of waste collected has increased by 3.9% over the past five years. This compares with a national increase of 2.8% per annum.

The council's Enforcement Unit has been in place for a little over a year. They didn't think that it was appropriate to carry out a satisfaction survey on litter collection until the team was established. They consider that it is now time for them to conduct a survey to review the first twelve months of operation. The Inspection Team referred to an issue whereby the county cuts the road verges, which sometimes results in litter being exposed or shredded by the strimmer machine. There was a suggestion that the district and the County should co-ordinate activities so that this litter was removed either before or immediately after a cut. They explained that they were aware of the issue, and that they had attempted to co-ordinate services, but the issue remained that the County are unable to supply them with their Contractors' schedule of work.

An increase in crime figures was anticipated, partly due to a change in the way in which crimes were recorded. However, they recognise that actual crime levels in certain areas have increased. This is one of the reasons why the partnership focuses on crime issues and the action plans are targeted on those areas in which the levels of crime are at their highest. They deny that 'Actions and targets in the community safety strategy 2002-2005 are not realistic and are not being achieved'. The majority of the targets in the strategy are nationally set. In terms of the setting of local targets, the partnership is setting stretch targets to reflect the ambition of the partnership. As the partnership matures, monitoring data and evaluation of projects and initiatives will enable the setting of more achievable local targets.

They consider that: 'The council's own resources will not deliver the decent homes target' is a statement of fact, and should not be classed as a weakness. They fully recognise that this is the case, and think that it should be a strength that they analysed the information, assessed the investment needed, recognised they couldn't meet the target alone, and accepted that stock transfer was the best option for the tenants. They consider that 'Lack of capacity to deliver other initiatives while working on stock transfer' is not a weakness. They are a small council pursuing stock transfer and that will obviously impact on capacity. In selecting the transfer landlord, they took into account the resources this partner could put into the Housing Transfer process.

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They maintain that they have ensured that the basic service performance is maintained but inevitably, recognise that some of the other initiatives have taken a lower priority at the present time. They fully recognise this, and have dealt with the other initiatives by building them into the offer document. If the tenants vote “No”, then they will expedite the initiatives themselves. In this period of uncertainty (until the tenants ballot result is known), it is difficult to recruit when people leave the Council, and this does mean that for a short period, they have operated below establishment levels in some areas. They have taken a decision that their preferred option is stock transfer, and their efforts are focused on this process at the moment. They think it is right for the council, and right for the tenants.

They dispute that ‘Delivery of Performance against key strategies, including the housing strategy, is not routinely reported to or monitored by senior managers’ and point out that:

- LSVT has been monitored at the Policy Development Group on two occasions, at Executive on three occasions, and at full council once in the last 12 months
- Repairs services has been monitored at the Policy Development Group on three occasions in the last 12 months
- Rent restructure has been monitored at the Policy Development Group on two occasions, at Executive on one occasion, and at full council twice in the last 12 months
- Housing needs survey has been monitored once at full council in the last 12 months
- Supporting People has been monitored at Executive four times, and full council three times in the last 12 months
- Housing Capital Programme has been monitored at Executive twice in the last 12 months

The Inspection Team specifically mentioned a lack of linkage between the local plan and the housing strategy. The council maintains that the Local Plan Review is being taken forward as a matter of urgency and there are corporate working arrangements in place (particularly the officer Housing Strategy Group) to ensure that housing and planning issues are dealt with consistently. However they would also consider that the existing Local Plan and 2003 Housing Strategy send out a consistent message.

5. Conclusions

- 5.1 The West Sussex authorities have achieved more than satisfactory ratings in the comprehensive performance assessment. However, it remains to be seen whether this pattern will be repeated in other counties, especially where there are complex and demanding communities.

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- 5.2 The next tranche of district councils to be assessed includes those in Cumbria and Devon. These authorities have already had their interim feedback. Analysis of this suggests that the comprehensive performance assessment in some of these districts may not be as high as in West Sussex.
- 5.3 Clearly there is a lot of potential for subjective interpretation of the situation in particular authorities, and those authorities that feel they have been unfairly criticised by the inspectors should issue a challenge.
- 5.4 In the case of the case study within this briefing paper, the authority has chosen to challenge the inspectors on a number of issues and to justify the local situation in instances where the inspectors have considered it to be a weakness. I am sure that it will not be the only authority to follow this path!

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