

Inspection report

June 2004



# Comprehensive performance assessment

**Epping Forest 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](http://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 Epping Forest District Council is a **good** council. It provides services to a good standard, is making very good progress toward meeting the decent homes standard and overall provides good management of public space. All the key components to enable further improvement exist or are planned but they are not all fully joined up, properly embedded or consistently applied.
- 5 The major issue facing the district is the balance between preserving the tranquillity and amenity of the local environment and meeting local and national pressures for growth and development. Preserving the quality of the environment is one of the council's main priorities and one which is endorsed by all groups on the politically balanced council. This contrasts with the recently published draft regional planning guidance (RPG14) for the east of England. This states that a further 18,600 homes should be built within Epping Forest district in the period up to 2021 as part of major expansion along the M11 corridor between London and Cambridge and Peterborough. This is significantly more than the council was expecting or that its current planning frameworks allow for. The challenge of developing and agreeing a clear policy response will provide a severe test of council's professional capacity and political robustness.
- 6 The quality of the council's services and activity is stronger than its paper plans and internal systems. The written community strategy is only now emerging, the council plan has a good set of service aims but the quality of service plans is varied. Declared priorities are too general to guide resource allocation but there are no important areas where the council is not taking appropriate action. The council is able to stay focused on important tasks even when the going gets difficult.
- 7 The council experiences difficulty in recruiting to certain posts, particularly for local government professions where there is a national shortage and where nearby councils are able to offer more money. Financial management is a strength and the council has achieved debt free status after several years of working to reduce its debt. Corporate performance management is a recent introduction but some services have a strong track record and this shows in the council's results.
- 8 Strong services include housing, benefits, revenues, environmental maintenance, waste recycling and community safety. There have been recent improvements in the time taken to process planning applications, land searches and benefits administration. 70 per cent of performance indicators improved between 2001/02 and 2003/04. The council is able to learn from its experience. It understands what it needs to do for the future but these ideas are not all consolidated into well written, resourced action plans.
- 9 For the past 10 years no party has had overall control on the council. All five political groups are represented in the cabinet and share the portfolios among themselves on a pro rata basis. Officers and councillors have developed appropriate structures and ways of working to enable this politically balanced council to work effectively most of the time. The council has a good reputation among partner organisations and has taken the lead to build effective partnerships to bring benefit to the local community.

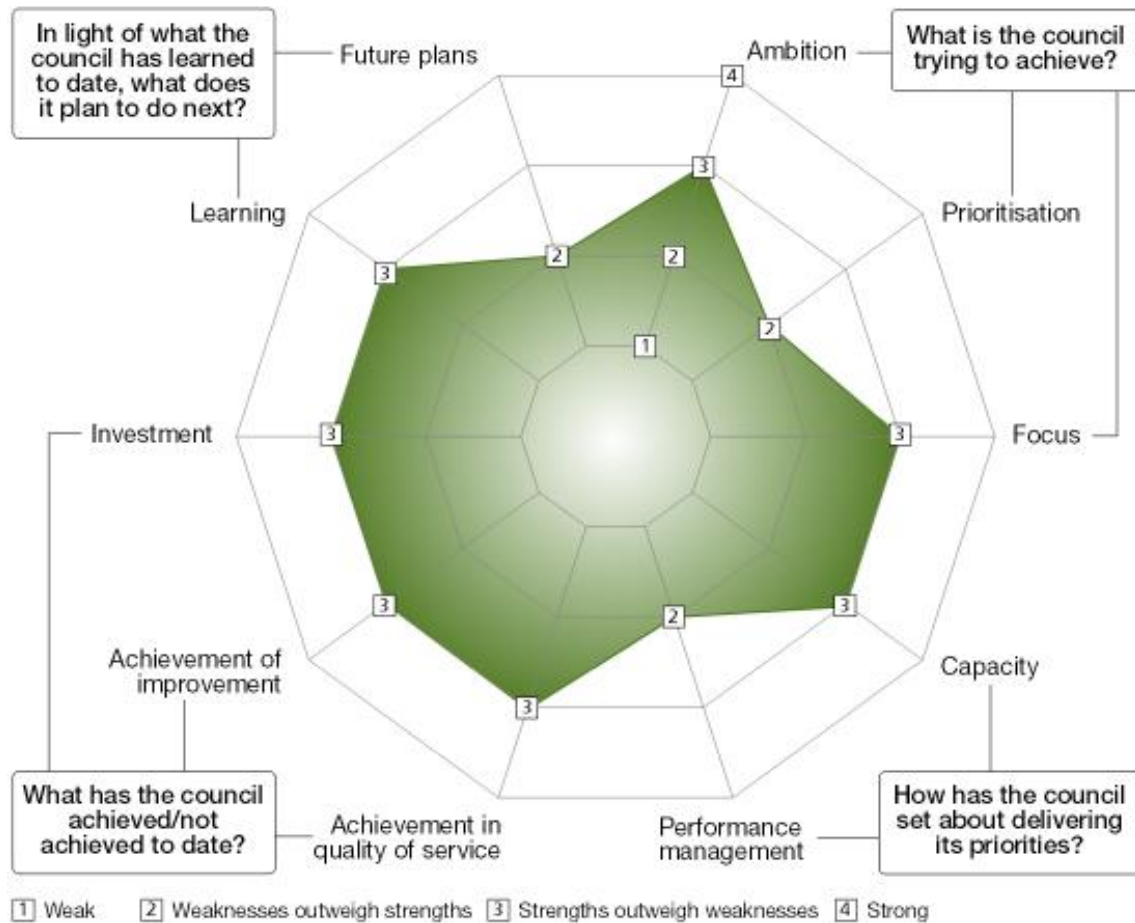
- 10 A big problem for the district is the shortage of affordable housing for local people and their families. There is an estimated need for 643 homes each year. Only 400 have become available through vacated council properties and new build over the past three years. So in spite of the efforts of the council, which received in 2003/04 the largest share of ACG in the eastern region, the problem is getting worse year by year. While RPG14 may offer an opportunity to do something about this, it will bring other significant difficulties in its wake.

## Summary of assessment scores

Top level question	Theme	Grade	Weighted score
What is the council trying to achieve?	Ambition	3	3
	Prioritisation	2	2
	Focus	3	3
How has the council set about delivering its priorities?	Capacity	3	3
	Performance management	2	2
What has the council achieved/not achieved to date?	Achievement in quality of service	3	9
	Achievement of improvement	3	9
	Investment	3	6
In light of what the council has learned to date, what does it plan to do next?	Learning	3	3
	Future plans	2	2
<b>Weighted score</b>			<b>42</b>
<b>Corporate assessment category</b>			<b>Good</b>

Epping Forest District Council scored well in seven out of ten of the areas assessed.

## Epping Forest District Council



## Recommendations

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

## Context

### The locality

- 12 Epping Forest District Council covers 34,500 hectares in the county of Essex. The district stretches from outer London in the south to rural Essex in the north. There is no natural centre and the majority of the district lies within the metropolitan green belt. The district has six main centres of population and a number of picturesque villages and hamlets. Epping Forest is ancient woodland, owned and managed by the Corporation of London.
- 13 The district has a population of 120,896 (2001 Census). Over 40 per cent of the population live in the south-west of the district which borders on London. The population is ageing: an increasing proportion of the population was over 75 in 2001 compared to 1991. Five per cent of the population is from ethnic minorities. The district is quartered by the M11 and M25 motorways and has eight central line underground stations.
- 14 The 1998 Index of Local Deprivation ranked the district as 150<sup>th</sup> of 354 district local authorities in terms of local deprivation. Overall, the district is seen as a prosperous area of large houses and wealth and the level of unemployment is low. Property prices within the district are extremely high; this is forcing indigenous young adults to leave the district and secure cheaper accommodation elsewhere. As an employer, the council has difficulties in recruiting staff because of high housing costs and proximity to London, where comparable local authority posts can attract higher salaries. Car ownership in the district is high, and lack of rural public transport results in a reliance on the car for essential journeys.
- 15 The biggest issue faced by the council is pressure for development coupled with the shortage of affordable housing. The council's longstanding policy of limiting development and green belt protection is now being challenged by government proposals for development in the London (M11) – Stansted – Cambridge corridor growth area. Recently published Regional Planning Guidance (RPG14) proposes that 18,600 houses will be built in the period up to 2021. This will require careful management to enhance and protect the special character of the district.

### The council

- 16 The council has 58 councillors elected for a period of four years, with election by thirds. The authority currently consists of 24 Conservative, 15 Liberal Democrat, 8 Labour, 1 Independent Labour, 6 Loughton Residents' Association and 4 Independent councillors. The council has been politically balanced for 10 years and all major committees, including cabinet, have pro-rata membership.
- 17 From 2000, following consultation with residents, the council piloted a leader and cabinet system of decision-making. This was formally adopted in May 2002. There are three overview and scrutiny committees with responsibility for specific portfolios, and a number of regulatory committees.
- 18 The district is fully parished, with 24 town and parish councils. The development of three-tier liaison is of particular importance to the council and the council has recently revised the local charter covering its relationship with the town and

parish councils as the basis for joint working. A local councils' liaison committee meets three times a year. The council has introduced four area-based sub-committees dealing principally with development control matters.

- 19 The council employs over 700 staff, organised into two arms, community services and resources. After recent restructuring, each arm is headed by a deputy chief executive, who along with the chief executive, form the council's management board. Ten heads of service, together with the management board, constitute the senior management team. The chief executive was taken ill in December of 2003 and had not returned to work when this assessment was carried out. The council's net revenue budget for 2003/04 is £14.163million. The council currently manages its own housing stock of approximately 6,800 dwellings – some 13 per cent of the total housing stock in the district.
- 20 The council carried out, as requested, a scored self assessment against each of the corporate assessment themes. The self assessment was informed by a peer review commissioned by the council and undertaken by IDeA in March 2003 with a follow up visit in November 2003. Using the Audit Commission's scoring mechanism the council has assessed itself as 'good'.

## What is the council trying to achieve?

### Ambition

- 21 Strengths outweigh weaknesses.
- 22 The council plan sets out the clear and widely publicised policy themes that state how the council proposes to maintain the area and to improve the services that it provides. There are three main themes each with a number of key aims:-
- ◆ **A healthy, safe and attractive place** – maintain the special character and advantage of the district and address local environmental issues, address key housing need, create safer communities, encourage sustainable economic development and address leisure need.
  - ◆ **An organisation that listens to resolve local issues** – political leaders give clear direction, communicate with public about service delivery, prioritises objectives and service and co-operates and plans with partners.
  - ◆ **Accessible, affordable and improving services** – identify and target resources; realise capacity and manage performance, procure services in the most beneficial and cost effective way, develop services, staff and working environment.

These themes are a clear statement of positive intent that reflects the current needs of the area and links well to the council's achievements. Needs are identified through a combination of demographic research, review of progress with existing policies, political representation and consultation. In some cases the aims are reinforced by specific targets, for example to ensure that 30 per cent of each major housing development consists of social housing for rent. However, in themselves they are too broad and general to inform service planning and resource allocation. Overall the council's verbally stated ambitions, evidenced in interviews and observation of council meetings are stronger than written versions.

- 23 The council plan for 2003-07 breaks the key themes down into 92 aims with responsibility assigned to each of the 10 portfolios. Of the 92, 67 are related to the first theme and state clearly ways in which services are to be developed and improved for the benefit of local people, they provide a clear statement of most of the council's intentions to improve outcomes for local people. But there are important gaps, for example the benefits service is omitted. Most of the aims are realistic and measurable but not supported by specific target measures or timescales. This follows through into service plans which are of variable quality.
- 24 All of the necessary components of a comprehensive corporate planning process are now in place, some of them very recently, but they are not tightly joined together. There is a clear hierarchy of plans starting with a high level community strategy leading through the council plan as the council's expression of what it intends to do as part of the community strategy via the best value performance plan (BVPP) to service and individual plans. The community strategy is only now being finalised, some parts of this hierarchy are new and other aspects are well established.

- 25 The council has a strong track record and a good reputation for partnership working. It took the initiative to establish the local strategic partnership (LSP). While relationships are strong the preparation of a written community strategy lags behind. The work on the community strategy is being led by the LSP with active support from the council. Partnerships for community safety and for social inclusion are long established and have achieved significant results, for example reduced crime, provision of health care facilities and benefits advice.
- 26 The draft community strategy prepared by the LSP is consistent with the plans of the council but has significant weaknesses. There has been extensive consultation about local needs and priorities. The draft strategy is brief; it includes a good account of the key issues facing the district and lists actions and policies that will be developed to address them. Under each of its seven themes it includes suggestions or exhortations for what individual local residents should do to further the aims. It includes no specific targets, it does not explain what the LSP is or who the 'we' are who is going to take the actions. Responsibility for actions is not assigned to particular agencies.
- 27 The council has taken the lead in approaching neighbouring district and county councils with a view to working together in response to RPG14. Prior to the announcement of RPG14, the council worked hard to influence national and regional bodies to produce guidance that would be in line with its own policies. It has worked to maintain and develop sustainable communities in the district through the crime and disorder reduction partnership (CDRP), youth activities and using single regeneration budget (SRB) funding to refurbish its most deprived housing estate. It has clear ambitions for the improvement of its own housing stock supported by good plans. It recognises the need for more affordable housing in the area and has used section 106 agreements and partnership with housing associations to secure some additional provision.
- 28 Political leadership is mature and generally effective. The council is politically balanced; all of the political groups are represented in the cabinet, the number of cabinet portfolios being allocated on the basis of the relative strength of each of the groups. Key political decisions are made on the basis of either consensus or an ad hoc majority. All of the groups recognise the reality of the political balance and are actively engaged in making it work in the interests of local people. The role of the council leader in such a situation has necessarily become closer to that of a facilitative chair of a committee than a party leader driving through a particular political programme.
- 29 The key policy themes are widely owned and understood within the council. Staff at all levels understand the overall aims and values of the council. Senior officers provide good leadership to staff and work well to ensure that when councillors' intentions are clear they are followed through. Senior officers also set a positive example in response to unplanned events that warrant priority attention. When a fire broke out in a block of flats in 2003, the leader of the council and the chief executive took a lead and personally ensured that residents were found accommodation for the night. The re-instatement work that followed was the fastest local authority work of such complexity that the insurance representative had ever encountered.

## **Prioritisation**

- 30 Weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area.

- 31 The council's declared priorities, its key policy themes, are too broad and all encompassing by themselves to inform effective service planning or resource allocation. The 92 aims in the council plan are not prioritised. The priority themes are referred to in service plans. But when a service plan, such as that for arts development, states that most of the proposed actions are in support of all three of the council priorities, then their value as an aid to decision making is limited. The council has no clearly stated priorities to allocate resources to meet the needs of deprived areas of the district or sections of the community.
- 32 While the declared priorities of the council are too broad, its implicit priorities are clearer. No major services are failing. The council does take steps to ensure improvement in key areas. Proper attention is paid to those matters, such as housing provision, environmental protection and community safety, which are held by councillors and officers to be most important. Sound financial management and modest council taxes have also been a high priority.
- 33 In practice the council's priorities, in most cases, are well aligned with national priorities. It is making good progress toward meeting the decent homes standard, set a council tax well within government guidelines and has a good record in relation to waste recycling and community safety.
- 34 The council consults extensively with partners including parish councils and the local community. Extensive use is made of the council's magazine 'The Forester' to inform and seek the views of individual households. There are good consultative mechanisms with tenants' organisations and an active youth council, however, arrangements to consult with ethnic minority groups are not so well established. These views are taken into account in setting priorities. The councillors also represent a wide range of local views. The broad nature of the priorities is a consequence of the wide range of views that have informed their development. Council priorities are publicised both internally and externally. The general priorities are well understood and accepted internally.
- 35 Resource allocation processes are sound; budget planning is more sophisticated than service planning. Innovatively, the council divides its general fund revenue budget into a continuing services budget (CSB) and a district development fund (DDF). CSB funds the continuing costs of maintaining ongoing services and the DDF enables short term funding to be allocated to new developments and service enhancements. In setting the budget for 2004/05, there was a rigorous evaluation of options for spending within a previously agreed overall cash envelope. The budget was agreed unanimously by the council following extensive discussion in overview and scrutiny committees and the cabinet. Some additional resources were allocated to the high priority area of environmental services and reductions were made in the leisure services budget. However budget setting by services is largely based on continuation of well established priorities. Many of the service plans do not appraise resource needs nor specifically allocate them to service priorities.

## Focus

- 36 Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area.
- 37 The council is capable of sustaining focus on important issues though from time to time, when no clear political decision is made, it allows problems to drift. The

council has sustained a focus on sound financial management. In 1992 it had long term external debt (borrowings) of £30million. It has worked over the past 11 years to reduce this debt and in 2003 was formally recognised as a debt free council. This enables the council to retain a higher proportion of its capital receipts to invest an additional £8.5million in housing and to meet its increased pension obligations without major service reductions. It has also led directly to the setting of a lower level of council tax for the benefit of the local community.

- 38 As a result of sustained attention, Epping Forest has managed to complete implementation of the national agreement to introduce a single status workforce. The council started negotiations in 1999, reached an unsatisfactory conclusion in 2002, re-started and reached agreement over job evaluations and new salary scales in the summer of 2003. Implementation was completed in early 2004. Now that new salary scales are in place there are indications that it is easing recruitment difficulties in some professional areas.
- 39 The commitment of the council coupled with leadership over several years of housing portfolio holders and good service management have ensured that the council has consistently maintained its housing stock at a high standard. It reached its March 2004 target for the decent homes standard a year early in 2003.
- 40 Given the fragile nature of the political structures in the council, useful officer led structures have been established to plan agendas and to ensure that business is conducted properly and efficaciously. The multi party cabinet means that party political discipline and organisation does not have the same function in Epping Forest as it does in other councils. Where a consensus already exists or is rapidly agreed decision making is rapid, for example in setting the budget for 2004/05. When agreement is not reached initiatives can drift, for example over the location of the new waste disposal facility or the outsourcing of leisure management. Portfolio holder decision making is done in a more structured setting than in other councils to ensure that decisions are made in an accountable way in the absence of a party structure. In the face of the political balance, senior officers have worked effectively to facilitate good working relationships between political groups to ensure that council business is conducted properly and effectively.
- 41 Largely effective officer structures are in place to ensure that performance and budget monitoring take place regularly and are reported to councillors. There are three corporate programme officer groups that play three important roles in relation to each of the three scrutiny committees – monitor budgets, monitor performance and plan committee agendas. These groups have useful role in monitoring performance and coordinating agendas but they do not consistently ensure that responsibility is assigned to bring performance back into line when it dips below expectations.
- 42 Mechanisms are in place to respond to external challenge. Following the peer challenge exercise, in the lead up to corporate assessment, the council wrote an improvement plan and established a high level improvement team to oversee its implementation. This team has monitored progress with the plan on a regular basis and most of the proposed actions are now completed. Following best value reviews and inspections, action plans are written and progress is reported regularly to scrutiny committees. In most cases actions are followed through although there are examples where reduced staffing capacity means that this is not always the case.

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

### Capacity

- 43 Strengths outweigh weaknesses.
- 44 Councillors understand their roles and the needs of the area. On most occasions decision making is robust, the political balance of the council means that major decisions are all given due consideration. Members are well informed and briefed by officers, and advice is appropriately professional. The council's meetings are generally well run. Its local planning committees are effective with members of the public and parish representatives are encouraged to contribute.
- 45 Councillors are involved both within the council and with external partners, and are well informed about their areas of responsibility. There is clarity about accountability; this is supported by a written code of conduct, local code of corporate governance and member role accountability statements. The council has a strong standards committee with an independent chair. This committee has taken the lead in reviewing protocols for councillors, officers and others involved in the planning process. It looked at good practice in other council's and has developed a set of protocols that have clarified roles and have widespread local support. There is a high level of professional respect between managers and councillors.
- 46 Scrutiny is less effective. Agendas are too long and performance information is not sufficiently focused to enable councillors to properly identify where improvement is needed. Members of scrutiny committees recognise that they could have greater impact and have set up a working party to review current practice.
- 47 The council has a competent and committed workforce that is lead by respected senior managers. However, the council faces difficulties in the recruitment and retention of professional staff. There are vacancies at professional levels, particularly in planning and engineering services. The council suffers from its proximity to London where salaries are higher. As a result, only the most urgent planning enforcement complaints now receive attention. The post of environmental co-ordinator is vacant and this has an impact on the implementation of energy conservation measures. Where additional staff have been brought in, or long standing vacancies filled, services have improved for example in audit and legal. The council has allocated funding in its budget for 2004/05 for the development of a recruitment and retention strategy.
- 48 The council has appropriate human resource (HR) policies and practices. It has introduced a casework management system which enables managers to deal with sickness absence, disciplinary matters, lateness, and other HR matters, with advice from nominated personnel officers. The council has not reported best value performance indicators (BVPIs) for staff sickness absence for the past two years; unaudited data for the current year places it in the bottom quartile at 11.5 days. The introduction of single status and the associated job evaluation scheme has had an adverse impact on morale among some staff of the council.
- 49 The council has a good approach to the development of its existing workforce. There is an extensive and well regarded programme of staff training courses. The

council has invested in a dedicated ICT training suite. This is complemented by an open learning centre where staff can access individual computer based learning packages. Learning needs are identified through annual staff development reviews which link council priorities to action plans and individual workloads. Comprehensive training programmes are also available for councillors but attendance is low because of time pressures; this reduces their value.

- 50 The council is financially secure; it has achieved debt free status and has more than adequate reserves. This is confirmed by the external auditor. The council has a four year financial forecast based on services continuing to run on the current pattern. The council's debt free position has provided additional resources for capital projects to the value of £8.5million and there are adequate resources to meet the decent homes standard by 2010.
- 51 The council has no overall procurement strategy, nor any dedicated procurement capacity, but it does take an open minded approach to procurement. It has made effective use of Egan type partnering contracts in housing services, although the contract for waste collection services has now reverted to a more traditional type after initial difficulties. It has decided in principle to outsource the management of leisure services, and uses a range of providers for its training programmes. It has transferred responsibility for management of some parks and open spaces to parish and town councils.
- 52 The council is well respected for its contribution to partnerships, for example the LSP, and operates at a number of levels taking a leadership role when appropriate. The council makes effective links with neighbouring councils and other agencies. The council uses its partnerships to increase its capacity, for example it has worked with the Environment Agency to procure flood relief schemes, with the county council on the summer university scheme for young people and through a successful highways agency agreement. In some cases the council invests its own resources for example in highway maintenance and in flood relief schemes to a greater extent than is strictly required in order to ensure that local needs are met.
- 53 It has good links with voluntary organisations, the council provides grant aid to enable the council for voluntary service to provide the secretariat for the LSP, has worked with the Citizens Advice Bureau to improve benefits advice and supported the development of a voluntary youth advice centre in Waltham Abbey.

## **Performance management**

- 54 Weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area.
- 55 In spite of recent improvements following the recent introduction of a corporate performance reporting system, performance management is not fully effective. Performance information is now reported on a quarterly cycle to management meetings and to scrutiny committees. The system is still bedding down and will need more time to prove its worth. The local performance indicators that the council gathers and reports are not all good measures of progress toward service targets, nor are they aligned with priorities. Performance monitoring is based on the regular reporting of BVPIs and local performance indicators (PIs); however these are not used consistently to actively manage performance.

- 56 The quality of performance management varies across the council's services. The corporate performance management system builds on long standing good practice in some of the council's services. The revenues service has made good use of BVPIs underpinned by individual performance indicators to drive service improvement over the past seven years. Council tax collection rates are very good. The housing service and parts of leisure services also have effective performance management systems that contribute to the development of a quality service. Those services that have effective performance management are those that have consistently performed well.
- 57 The quality of performance information is not satisfactory. A significant proportion of the council's figures for national PIs were inaccurate or could not be verified because of poor arrangements for producing the data until additional work was undertaken. Inaccurate information does not provide a sound basis for monitoring performance, identifying problems or reporting to councillors and the public.
- 58 Systematic collection and presentation of performance data is relatively new. Performance indicators are those specified as best value performance indicators (BVPIS) together with some locally determined indicators. Members of scrutiny committees are presented with all the indicators relating to the portfolios scrutinised by the particular committee, there is little done to draw out lessons or to say what action is proposed or has been taken in response. Little performance information is broken down geographically for example to enable service managers and councillors to focus attention on those areas of the district where performance is weaker or to learn from those where it is good.
- 59 Performance planning is based on service plans. These are of variable quality; some are very good for example the revenues service and housing. Some are not, for example Epping Forest arts or planning services, these consist mainly of a list of tasks to be carried out during the coming year with little clear indication of the benefits that will arise.
- 60 There is a system of individual staff review in place that meets the requirements of the Investor in People standard. Every member of staff has a 'staff development review' with their manager annually. Some of these reviews clearly link individual performance targets to service plans and council priorities, but this is not universally the case.
- 61 There are good examples of effective project management. Major ICT investments are formally project managed and in most cases have been delivered on time and close to budget. External project management is also used on major construction projects but as a result of some difficulties with the completion of Loughton leisure centre, the council was not able to open it on schedule.
- 62 The council has developed a comprehensive approach to risk management; there is a high level corporate risk register that is used to manage risk reductions. The register initially identified 36 category one risks, risk management plans were developed and so reduced the category one risks to four. The risk register is used to plan the audit programme. Risk assessment and management is evident in some service plans, for example housing, but this approach is not fully embedded across the whole council.

- 63 Complaints data is reported quarterly to councillors but this is not integrated with performance reporting nor used to inform service improvement. Six services have ISO9000 accreditation that show that systems are in place to ensure that service standards are consistently applied. There is a well publicised customer charter that sets out general principles for all of the council's services but specific service standards are not widely available.
- 64 Financial management at the council is very sound. However links between service plans, service costs and outcomes are weak. So while overall the council provides reasonable value for money, it does not give sufficient critical attention to service costs or use comparative bench marking data as an integrated component of performance management.

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

### Achievement in quality of service

- 65 There are more strengths than weaknesses in this aspect of the council's work.
- 66 Overall 58 per cent of the council's PIs were in the top two quartiles for 2002/03 compared with other authorities. The council is performing well in relation to national priorities including progress toward the decent homes standard, recycling domestic waste, administration of benefits including combating fraud, community safety and limiting the level of council tax rises. In spite of the general way in which the council's priorities are expressed there are no important areas where the council is providing a poor service, although performance in relation to processing planning applications, homelessness and waste minimisation is below average. Achievements are analysed below under headings that relate to the key themes of the council.
- 67 The council is generally well regarded by local residents for environmental protection, financial management, recycling and planning services. Satisfaction levels are lower for leisure, recreation facilities, provision for young people, traffic congestion and cultural services. In the most recent satisfaction survey (2001) 69 per cent of residents said that they are satisfied with the council's services; this is 4 per cent better than predicted on the basis of deprivation.

### Environment

- 68 Significant benefits for local people have been achieved through the council's town centre enhancement schemes. Coordination between agencies in regard to managing the street scene has improved but on occasion integration is lacking, for example when grass mowing is done before litter picking. The town centre enhancement work at Buckhurst Hill was recognised by a Certificate in Excellence design award.
- 69 The council operates an effective waste recycling service, its performance at 21 per cent is in the top quartile and has good public satisfaction. Removal of fly tipping and abandoned vehicles is very good and meets the council's targets, but the council is not effectively reducing the levels of household waste collections and waste levels continue to rise despite promotional campaigns.
- 70 The council contributes well to managing the local environment and conservation is high on the council's agenda. It has worked in effective partnership with the environment agency to implement flood alleviation schemes. It has established local nature reserves and these are well maintained through a voluntary country care workforce that is supported by the council. Some of the reserves include facilities for people with disabilities. Roding Valley nature reserve was awarded a Green Flag Award for its open space management.
- 71 Leisure services generally meets locally set targets. Across the range of provision there were 5.76 attendances per head of population at leisure activities during 2002/03. Five leisure centres and five other council services have achieved the ISO9001 standard that shows that systems are in place to deliver a consistent quality of service. Four leisure centres have been awarded chartermarks.

- 72 The council determined 70 per cent of all planning applications within six weeks during 2001/02; this slipped back during 2002/03 to below government targets although performance remains above average except for major applications which is in the bottom quartile. This is in part a consequence of staff recruitment difficulties and in part due to the high level of public interest in planning issues which means that a higher than average proportion of decisions are referred to committee for public decision. The proportion of standard searches carried out within 10 days at 29 per cent was poor, well below the bottom quartile average of 80 per cent.

### **Housing and benefits**

- 73 The council provides a good housing service – its stock is of good quality and is well managed. The council has reduced its proportion of housing that does not meet the decent homes standard (DHS) by over 30 per cent and reached its March 2004 target by 2003. Average re-let times for vacant properties and the proportion of rent due that is actually collected are both in the top quartile. There is a high level of tenant satisfaction with the council's housing services with all indicators in the national housing federation survey exceeding 82 per cent. Its housing strategies have been judged as one of the few councils that meets the 'fitness for purpose standard' and to be 'well above average' by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM). However the service to homeless people is slow due to the overall shortage of affordable housing in the district and so households have to spend longer than average in temporary accommodation.
- 74 The one key area where performance is below what is needed locally and what the council itself would like to achieve is provision of affordable social housing for local people. It is estimated that 643 additional affordable homes are needed annually. The council has made strenuous efforts to ensure that new housing developments include a substantial component of social housing and has made good use of section 106 agreements and other means to secure 400 houses over the past three years. The council has attracted more social housing investment from the Housing Corporation than any other district in the East of England: £7.14million to build 82 homes. But the combination of increasing demand and council house sales reducing the supply means that, as in many parts of south east England, the gap grows ever wider.
- 75 The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate (BFI) report that the council's benefits service is providing a 'fair towards good' service. The authority's current performance demonstrates a number of strengths including good levels of customer service, top quartile performance in most areas of claims processing, and very close to standard in most areas of performance. However, there are a number of weaknesses including the need to comply with the Race Relations Act, improve access to the benefits service for those with specific needs, and set individual targets to ensure overall aims are achieved.

### **Safer communities**

- 76 Together with its partners on the crime and disorder reduction partnership (CDRP), the council has taken action to address crime and the fear of crime. Crime in the district is around average when compared to the rest of the country. The CDRP has introduced a number of initiatives including ones to deter burglary, discourage travelling criminals, where the use of CCTV and automatic number plate recognition equipment have been used to complement additional

patrols by the local transport police, and reduce domestic violence where a number of multi-agency women's safety courses have been run.

### Resource management

- 77 In 2003 the council, after 11 years of careful financial management, achieved debt free status. This has enabled the council to retain more of its capital receipts and significantly strengthens its financial position and so enabled it to keep council tax rises low while not jeopardising services or investment.
- 78 Council tax and non-domestic rate collection levels are very good. It is in the top quartile for both indicators with 98.2 per cent of council tax and 98.9 per cent of non domestic rates collected. 77 per cent of council buildings are accessible to disabled people, this is well above the top quartile threshold of 53 per cent but has not improved over the past three years.
- 79 In spite of recent improvements the council's website is not easy to navigate. It provides inadequate information and does not enable local people to communicate effectively with the council. As a result, the council is unable to engage in a meaningful way with its community by this means, and does not use electronic media effectively to provide or promote services directly to the public.

### Achievement of improvement

- 80 Strengths outweigh weaknesses.
- 81 70 per cent of BVPIs improved from 2001/02 to 2002/03. This improvement trend as shown by the council's own data has continued for many services during the current year. The council has made significant improvements in its housing services, leisure facilities, and planning.

### Environment

- 82 Performance on determining planning applications has improved this year following last year's disappointing dip in performance, according to the council's own data. The council was awarded a planning delivery grant in respect of its improvements in this service between 2001 and 2002. Local land searches have improved markedly during the current year following poor performance at only 29 per cent in 2002/03 and the unaudited average turn round time for land searches is now 8.5 days with 95 per cent of searches completed within ten days.
- 83 The council has a good recycling service and has improved its performance on a year on year basis. Rates are among the best in the county. In 2002/03 the council recycled 21 per cent of the waste collected and has continued to improve, this year 25 per cent of waste collected has been recycled or composted (council's own figures). However, the council does not have explicit plans to improve recycling, or meet statutory recycling standards. Despite being a stated aim of the council, it is accepted that the statutory target for 2003/04 (28 per cent) will not be met and the target for 2005/06 (36 per cent) is at risk.
- 84 The new Loughton leisure centre opened in 2003 and while full year figures are not available, it has improved the range and quality of leisure facilities available in the district. Preliminary indications are that there has also been a significant

increase in attendances. The country care service has improved access for walkers and disabled people in the Roding Valley and elsewhere in the district. In partnership with the Environment Agency the council has invested in improved flood defences in key areas of the district.

### **Housing and benefits**

- 85 The benefits service was not performing well three years ago but the recent BFI report was very positive, highlighted a marked improvement in the service and rated the council as having 'good' capacity to improve further. Time taken to process new benefit claims improved from 75 days to 40 days between 2000/01 and 2002/03. Time taken to process changes in circumstances slipped slightly from 15 to 17 days and the proportion of renewal claims processed on time improved from 35 per cent to 53 per cent.
- 86 The council has ensured improvement in its housing stock and is making good progress toward the DHS and the proportion of homes failing to meet the DHS fell by 35 per cent during 2002/03 placing Epping Forest well in the top quartile. Physical and environmental improvements on the Limes Farm estate have led to increased demand for housing on this once hard to let estate. Housing management performance has also improved. Average re-let times for vacated council homes improved from a top quartile 29 days to a very good nine days between 2000/01 and 2002/03. In the same period the proportion of urgent housing repairs completed within government time limits improved from 93 per cent to 99 per cent. The length of time that homeless families stay in temporary accommodation while still not good has improved significantly during the current year. The council is securing affordable homes through the use of section 106 agreements, since 1995 131 have been completed, 133 have been approved and applications for a further 88 are under consideration. However in spite of these efforts the supply of new affordable homes in the district remains insufficient.

### **Community safety**

- 87 Community safety initiatives led to an overall reduction in crime of 16 per cent in 2001/02. The figures for 2002/03 show small increases but have little significance when changes in crime recording practice are taken into account. Two hundred and fifty council staff have been trained to receive reports of hate crimes; there is a high level of reporting of hate incidents indicating the confidence that the community has in the system. Together with the police, the council sponsors women's safety courses in order to increase confidence and reduce the incidence of violence against women.

### **Resource management**

- 88 Between 2001/02 and 2002/03 there was improvement in all of the resource management BVPIs where comparison is possible including timely payment of invoices, percentage of council tax and non-domestic rates collected, electronic service delivery and the ratio of ethnic minority employees to the local population. The proportion of council buildings accessible to disabled people remained static but still well in the top quartile, options for the improvement of Epping sports centre, the main remaining non compliant building, are under consideration.

## Investment

- 89 Strengths outweigh weaknesses.
- 90 The council is investing to improve many of its weaknesses. It has put a comprehensive corporate planning process in place that includes a useful service plan template that should ensure that service plans are more consistent in future. The corporate performance management system is a recent development that is starting to show signs of improvement in that area. It has re-focused the remit of its former best value team to support performance management. Much of this investment is recent and so it is too soon to judge its impact.
- 91 It has invested effectively in new computer systems to support its business processes and to improve service performance. New benefits and financial management systems were well project managed and are leading to improved performance. The improvements to the benefits service are described above, the finance system enables commitment accounting and the speedy preparation of financial reports, it has reduced the staff required to administer the council's finances. The installation of an improved system to manage planning applications and land searches is underway.
- 92 Single status negotiations and the associated salary re-gradings are now complete. This enables the council to offer more attractive packages to professional staff who it has had some difficulty in recruiting in recent times. The council has also agreed to spend £250,000 on a recruitment strategy in order to address these problems. It has introduced a package of discounted benefits for staff. The council has achieved the Investors in People award which recognises that it is systematically investing in the capacity of its existing staff.
- 93 It has invested in services that improve the quality of life for local people. It has invested in its own housing over a long period and so is making good progress toward the decent homes standard. It has secured extensive capital funding to enable social landlords to build new housing in the district and has made some council land available without charge. It has taken steps to better align its street cleaning and waste management contracts in order to achieve a more joined up service. It has also invested extensively in enhanced flood defences and so reduced the risk of flooding in some vulnerable areas of the district.
- 94 The medium term financial forecast shows that the council has adequate resources to maintain and develop its current services over the coming four years provided that there are no major discontinuities. The DDF is a fund specifically established to fund revenue investments; in 2003/04 it funded the new revenues and benefits ICT system (£104,000), IEG investment and enhancement of the council website (£148,000), additional planning staff to prepare the new district plan (£148,000) and the land charges ICT system (£73,000). The council has a good forward capital plan; this anticipates £8million of non housing capital investment over the five years starting in 2003. This includes £2million investment in ICT, £500,000 toward flood defences and £1.1million on traffic calming measures. The council is active in pursuing external funding as opportunities arise. It received funding from the sports lottery toward the cost of Loughton leisure centre, SRB funding toward for the refurbishment of Limes Farm estate and the district has received the highest level of housing corporation funding for social housing of any district in its region. It makes effective use of section 106 agreements to secure investment in affordable housing. The major

issue that the council faces in the coming years is RPG14. It has taken some early steps to secure additional capacity in its planning service through retaining the services of the well regarded head of planning as a consultant when he retires.

- 95 Although the council has no formal written procurement strategy, it has good links with external partners and an open minded and flexible approach to purchasing services. It has little corporate capacity or expertise in this area and has recently joined the Essex procurement agency in order to access expertise in this area. It is also piloting an electronic purchase order system. It has established good practice in some areas, for example housing services make extensive use of partnering contracts.
- 96 The council responds positively to external challenge but does not always proactively seek it. Best value reviews and inspections are followed by an action plan and the progress with making improvements monitored. In the response to the peer review that took place in the lead up to the corporate assessment, the council drew up a comprehensive action plan and established a broadly based group of councillors to oversee and monitor its implementation. It also uses the challenge of meeting external standards for example ISO9000, chartermark or Investors in People as a spur to service improvement. Internal challenge is intermittent and not consistently rigorous.

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

### Learning

- 97 Strengths outweigh weaknesses.
- 98 The council is aware of its relative strengths and weaknesses. Its self assessment identifies very similar strengths and weaknesses to this inspection. It has a very open approach to reviewing its practice and discussing its ways of working with others.
- 99 There is a strong culture of learning across the council. Staff from all departments recognise and value the provision of in service learning opportunities. Staff development reviews are used to identify individual learning needs in relation to service plans and objectives. Information is shared across services through the senior management team. There are many examples of learning taking place and being applied across the council. There are however no deliberate structures or procedures in place to ensure that learning is derived from all of the available opportunities. For example the council has not completed a section 17 community safety audit to identify learning from its current activity in this area. This means that some potential learning opportunities are lost and improvement opportunities missed.
- 100 The council is able to learn from its own experience and to apply that learning to improve practice. Considerable project management difficulties arose during the construction of the civic offices in the late 1980s, so the council set up systems for project management that are applied to major construction projects and ICT installations. This has led to most such projects completing on time. It also learnt from an earlier computer installation to ensure that the contractors were responsible for any additional costs arising from delays. So when problems arose during the recent installation of a new benefits administration system the additional cost of extending existing software licences was borne by the contractor. The new corporate performance management system builds upon existing good practice in revenues and housing services.
- 101 The council regularly reviews the outcomes of planning decisions to ensure that quality is maintained. It is also aware of possible unintended consequences, for example residents were disturbed by the lorries moving large amounts of soil from a golf course site. So now, traffic movements are controlled as a condition of the permission. Staff in the council did not feel that they were receiving fully adequate information during the process of implementing single status so the council reviewed its approach to communications and made improvements.
- 102 Councillors too reflect on their practice. The council leader has taken part in a CPA peer challenge exercise in another council in order to broaden his perspective. Scrutiny committee members have been concerned that they were not having the impact that they potentially could and so have established a working party to review how the scrutiny process is working and to propose changes.

- 103 The council has actively sought information from other councils about good practice, for example Brighton and Hove on risk management and Camden on future housing management options. However such learning is usually the result of initiatives taken by individual officers or councillors, when this does happen it is welcomed. It has used its links with the legal services network to improve the way that certain legal work is carried out.
- 104 Although some services, including housing, planning and finance do participate in benchmarking groups with other authorities, the council does not have a proactive and systematic approach to bench marking data to enable it to know how well its services are performing in relation to others and so initiate action to improve where necessary.

## **Future plans**

- 105 Weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area.
- 106 The council's overall community and service planning framework is now in place and the BVPP and service plans for 2004/05 will be the first financial year that begins with the full set in place. This will establish firmer links between the high level community strategy and council plan and the operational service plans. Service plans and the BVPP are reviewed annually and there is provision to review the LSP and council plan also.
- 107 Statutory plans and strategies are in place. The plans that are judged by government departments and agencies are well regarded. For example the HRA business plan and the housing strategy were among the first in the country to be graded as 'fit for purpose' by the ODPM. Plans and strategies for 'supporting people', 'homelessness', 'home energy conservation', 'culture' and 'local agenda 21' have been written and where necessary given government agency approval. The DHS plan is robust. The asset management plan and the capital strategy are both rated as 'good'. One of the significant strategies that is missing is a race equality strategy.
- 108 In some important areas of activity, where the council knows it has to take action and has ideas for what it might do, there is no clear written plan to support its intentions is in place. For example there is currently no waste management strategy in place but the district intends to work with the county council to develop a joint strategy for both waste collection and disposal. The council has talked internally for some years about the need to improve customer contact processes and to establish some kind of contact centre. There is no clear plan to bring this about, although prudently purchasing decisions over computer installations and software that have a bearing on customer contact are being taken with the needs of such a centre in mind.
- 109 The council has a robust financial plan but preparation of an associated workforce plan is at a very early stage. It has a long standing four year financial forecast. This shows likely budget requirements and overall position in the light of known policies and linked resource requirements. The financial position of the council is stable and there is very low risk of significant financial difficulties arising. The council has agreed to invest £250,000 during 2004/05 in a recruitment and retention strategy; however there is no specific plan or workforce development strategy in place to inform how this will be used.

- 110 There is a clear policy and processes are in place to consult partners and residents over the general direction of council strategy and its future plans. Service users and delivery partners are involved in the development of specific service plans. There are good arrangements to consult tenants and other stakeholders in housing plans. A housing stock option appraisal has been completed and appropriate investment plans are in place. Communities have confidence in arrangements for the reporting of hate crimes and there are good links with police and women's organisations in planning responses to domestic violence. Young people's views are captured through surveys, the youth council and an annual youth day.
- 111 The biggest issue facing the council in the future is also the source of greatest uncertainty. RPG14 states that 18,600 homes should be built in Epping Forest in the next 20 years. The council had campaigned for fewer than this as the maximum number that the district could accommodate and preserve its environmental character. There is no consensus within the council or within the wider community over what is an acceptable number or where they should best be built. RPG14 was published in early February, senior officers and councillors are showing leadership in trying to make links with other councils in the area to establish a common response and to persuade the local community to be realistic in the face of the long term government strategy for the development of south-east England. It is early days and the council is still formulating its response.

## Summary of theme scores and strengths / weaknesses

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Ambition	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Council plan sets out broad and well understood aims</li> <li>• Needs identified through political representation, research and consultation</li> <li>• Playing an active role in setting up local partnerships</li> <li>• Political leadership effective internally and externally</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community strategy is only now emerging and has weaknesses</li> <li>• Council plan and business plans do not all have SMART targets</li> </ul>
Prioritisation	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effective consultation with the community and communication of priorities</li> <li>• Resource allocation processes are sound</li> <li>• Alignment between council priorities and national priorities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Council declared priorities are too broad and include all areas of council service</li> <li>• No clarity around geographical and deprivation priorities</li> <li>• Service plans do not allocate resources to specific priorities</li> </ul>
Focus	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where a strong political consensus exists focus is good</li> <li>• Have stuck with single status and seen it through</li> <li>• Sustained focus on housing stock</li> <li>• Stayed focused on reducing debt – now debt free</li> <li>• Agenda planning and CPG mechanisms are in place to plan agendas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Performance data not consistently focused on key issues</li> <li>• Where no political consensus exists issues can drift</li> </ul>
Capacity	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financially sound, 4 year financial forecast in place</li> <li>• Good staff and member training programme</li> <li>• Councillors mostly clear about roles and accountabilities</li> <li>• Very positive approach to partnership working</li> <li>• Some examples of Egan type procurement</li> <li>• Competent and committed workforce</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of take up of training by some members</li> <li>• Recruitment and retention problems for some professional posts</li> <li>• Staff morale suffering following single status</li> <li>• Scrutiny not fully effective</li> <li>• High sickness rates and sickness data not used effectively to manage absence</li> </ul>

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Performance management	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Robust performance management in some services e.g. revenues and housing</li> <li>• Some examples of good project management</li> <li>• Comprehensive risk register in place and linked to audit plan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Service plans and council plan make inconsistent use of SMART targets</li> <li>• Local PIs not aligned to priorities</li> <li>• Poor quality performance information, many PIs qualified in audit</li> <li>• Staff development reviews inconsistently refer to service plans</li> <li>• Members not getting information in a way that enables them to monitor service performance</li> <li>• Little use of benchmarking data or cost analysis</li> </ul>
Achievement in quality of service	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Housing service is good, DHS target for 2005 is met already</li> <li>• Top quartile recycling performance</li> <li>• 58% of PIs in top 2 quartiles</li> <li>• Good performance on council tax collection; benefits service fair to good</li> <li>• Achieved debt free status</li> <li>• Leisure generally meeting local PIs</li> <li>• ISO accreditations</li> <li>• Disabled access provision</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Website is improving but still not easy to access information</li> <li>• Mixed levels of customer and partner satisfaction</li> <li>• Homeless people spend too long in temporary accommodation</li> <li>• Planning and land search performance dipped in 2002/03</li> </ul>
Achievement of improvement	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 70% of PIs improved year on year</li> <li>• Planning PIs and land searches have improved in 2003/04</li> <li>• BFI rate council good for capacity to improve – benefits service improved over past 2 years</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provision of affordable homes</li> <li>• Disabled access not improving</li> <li>• Will not meet 2003/04 recycling target</li> </ul>
Investment	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Investment in ICT infrastructure and systems</li> <li>• Performance management framework in place</li> <li>• Acting on recommendations of peer challenge</li> <li>• New leisure centre at Loughton</li> <li>• Single status</li> <li>• Investment in council housing stock and for social landlord</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not always proactive in seeking external challenge and internal challenge intermittent</li> <li>• Some investments in place but not yet embedded – performance management, recruitment strategy, procurement agency</li> </ul>

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Learning	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong learning culture</li> <li>• Aware of what council needs to do better</li> <li>• Review of scrutiny taking place</li> <li>• Look at good practice elsewhere e.g. legal services network</li> <li>• Using good practice in some services to improve across council e.g. performance management in revenues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning not systemised into structures</li> <li>• No regular use of benchmarking</li> </ul>
Future plans	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Statutory plans are to acceptable standard</li> <li>• Medium term financial forecast in place</li> <li>• Housing 30 year business plan</li> <li>• Service planning framework in place</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No waste management strategy</li> <li>• Contact centre an important aspiration but no plan to achieve</li> <li>• No race equality strategy</li> <li>• Community plan only now emerging</li> <li>• Uncertainty of response to RPG14</li> <li>• No workforce development plan</li> </ul>

**Scoring key:**

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

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

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

- 112 There is a very low risk of service or function failure and/or poor outcomes.
- 113 The council's ambitions for housing are robust and reflect national and local priorities; they directly link to two of the three high level priorities within the council plan. They are consistent with the priorities and targets established within the housing strategy, HRA business plan and the capital strategy.
- 114 The council also has clear ambitions for its tenants that reflect its community leadership role and its responsibility to provide homes that meet the DHS. It aims to meet and exceed the 2010 DHS and to maintain its homes at that standard for the next 30 years. Councillors are clear about the housing related issues facing the district. There is consensus on the need to do more to address the shortage of affordable housing in the district. There are also clear ambitions to eliminate the use of bed and breakfast accommodation and to reduce or eliminate homelessness.
- 115 The council will exceed the basic DHS by installing central heating in every home by 2001, double glazing by 2008 and ensuring that all homes have a SAP rating of 65 by 2004. Window locks and other enhanced security will also be installed. While the council has not formally converted these to enhanced standards, nor formally agreed them with tenants' organisations, they are the items that emerge as the most popular from surveys of tenants.
- 116 The council engages effectively with its tenants and stakeholders in the development of its ambition for its housing stock. It meets regularly with RSLs and the Housing Corporation. There are bi-annual meetings with RSLs and more frequent meetings with the Tenants and leaseholders federations. Feedback following consultation with tenants and other stakeholders was incorporated in the HRA business plan. This led to the enhancements to improvement works outlined above.
- 117 In developing the programme for its housing stock, the council has considered the wider issues surrounding the provision of its housing services, including diversity, maintenance of the environment and the need to balance its housing market. For example the council has an ambition to deliver 30 per cent energy improvement in 15 years.
- 118 The council has good quality accurate information about its housing stock. The most recent stock condition survey, completed in 2001 covered the external condition of all properties the internal condition of a representative sample of 20 per cent. Data was revalidated in 2003 for DHS and included detailed information about the nature and conditions of property, such as repairs history, asbestos and energy efficiency. At 1 April 2003 only 15 per cent of the council's 6,800 housing stock did not meet the DHS. The council therefore knows which homes meet the standard and also which may fall below the standard over the next few

years. There is an effective system of monitoring in place to keep its stock information up to date. This enables the council to include works completed as part of voids, repairs and planned schemes. The council estimates that it would need to spend £4,890,938 between 2004 and 2010 to reach the DHS. Although higher standards have not been formally agreed with tenants, the council expects to spend additional money to keep its homes above the minimum standard.

- 119 The council's debt free position has provided an additional £8.5million for capital works and there are adequate resources to meet and exceed the DHS by 2010. Additional capital works are, therefore, being done to raise the quality of the homes above DHS. Examples of these are double glazing and door entry systems.
- 120 The council also has good quality information about the current and future demand for social housing in the area. The 2003 updated housing needs survey showed a need for an estimated 643 units of affordable housing each year although the present the supply of new social housing falls well short of this.
- 121 The council will retain and continue to manage its own housing stock, this accords with the strong preference expressed by its tenants. It carried out a housing stock option appraisal in line with guidance received from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) and considered six options. These were large scale voluntary transfer, arms length management organisation, use of private finance initiative, securitisation, tenant management organisation and retention. The process was supported by an independent tenants' adviser. The appraisal was comprehensive and considered the economic and social impact of all options.
- 122 The options appraisal was open and tenants' representatives and the independent tenants adviser and the tenants and leaseholders federations all made significant contributions into the process. Consultation with individual tenants on stock options was not, however, comprehensive. Individual tenants were only consulted as part of the second phase. Some tenants also felt that the council was trying to steer the decision towards a LSVT. There was, however, a general impression that the council listens. There is joint ownership from tenants on the outcome of the options appraisal. The tenants and leaseholders federations members feel that the council now sufficiently involves them in its deliberations. As an example federation members now examine and comment on council proposals prior to council meetings. The outcome of the options appraisal was a very strong preference from the tenants for the housing stock to remain in council ownership.
- 123 The council has put in place a robust plan to deliver the government's 2004 and 2010 DHS targets. There is a clear housing investment strategy and a clear path towards delivering the government's 2004 and 2010 targets for decent homes. It plans to invest £20million between 2003 and 2008, for planned maintenance and enhancements including boiler replacements and other schemes. This is included in the council's capital strategy. The council has a comprehensive HRA business plan and housing strategy. Both documents were confirmed as meeting the 'fit in purpose' standard and provide good links to the capital strategy. The assumptions within the business plans are reasonable and the resulting action plan is SMART.

### Is the council delivering its plans to meet the decent homes standard?

- 124 There is very low risk of service or function failure and/or poor outcomes.
- 125 The council has undertaken a thorough assessment of the resources it will need to deliver DHS. Financial resources have been reprioritised to deliver the target and the capital strategy reflects the investments needed in the housing stock to meet the DHS. The council has further considered the investment needed to keep its housing stock above the minimum standard and beyond 2010.
- 126 The council's DHS investment programmes cover the short, medium and long term in sufficient detail. There is a five year plan and a further 30 year business plan for housing capital works. It has also considered the impact of the recent changes in local government finance on its business plan. The programme of work is comprehensive and includes all elements required to meet the decent homes standard. About 20 per cent of the total maintenance budget for 2003/04 is for responsive maintenance, with 80 per cent covering planned programmes. This exceeds the good practice levels recommended by the Audit Commission. The housing capital programme is directly linked to DHS delivery.
- 127 There has been investment in the main building blocks needed to ensure the council delivers DHS and its housing services. New software has been purchased to monitor progress and provide data for HIP returns. The council is financially sound and adequate capital funds are available. Stock data is kept up to date and used to inform capital programmes. Portable computers and associated software have been purchased to provide updates on the condition of properties and inform the capital programme. This is also done by integrating capital works inspection with DHS programming.
- 128 To support its investment in its housing stock the council actively addresses related issues, such as crime and disorder, anti social behaviour, regeneration, disability discrimination and diversity. It has also established programmes to keep track of its delivery in these areas. For example, it takes an active part in the CDRP. The council meets the Commission of Racial Equality (CRE) code of practice and regularly monitors its ethnicity data for all applications and allocations, and takes corrective actions as necessary. Satisfaction ratings among ethnic minority tenants are similar to those for tenants generally at 82 per cent.
- 129 The council made use of modern procurement principles, including Egan, in its partnering, contracting and construction arrangements. Consultants were employed through open competition to facilitate these and contractors are now appointed on an open book basis and councillors have agreed the development of partnering arrangements with contractors. More generally the housing service has a reputation for strong contract management and most contracts are delivered to specification and within budget. The quality of work is monitored jointly by tenants, contractors and the council.
- 130 The council makes effective use of partnerships in delivering complex regeneration programmes. An example is the jointly funded Limes Farm regeneration scheme, with support from the police, voluntary groups, residents and £1million SRB funding. There are also other examples of the council working with local RSLs in addressing housing issues. The capital strategy provides a

strong framework for partnership working and it recognises the importance of partnership in delivering complex tasks and increasing capacity.

- 131 The council has achieved a reduction by over 30 per cent in the proportion of non decent stock, ahead of the government's 2004 target and is making good progress in its plan to meet the 2010 DHS targets. Audit Commission BVPI 184a placed the council in the top quartile for the percentage of council homes non decent at April 2002, and top quartile on BVPI 184b for percentage change in non-decent between April 2002 and April 2003, and top quartile on BV 72 (HIP) on percentage of urgent repairs completed within government limit. However, although the council is making steady progress towards its 2010 HECA target, it is currently below average on BVPI 63 for SAP rating of council owned dwellings.
- 132 Average re-let times for vacant properties and the proportion of rent due that is actually collected are both in the top quartile. There is a high level of tenant satisfaction with the council's housing services with all indicators in the national housing federation survey exceeding 82 per cent. Average re-let times for vacated council homes improved from a top quartile 29 days to a very good 9 days between 2000/01 and 2002/03. In the same period the proportion of urgent housing repairs completed within government time limits improved from 93 per cent to 99 per cent.

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

- 133 There is a very low risk of service or function failure and/or poor outcomes.
- 134 There are effective systems in place for members and officers to monitor progress against DHS and the HRA business plan. The portfolio holder for housing has six-weekly meetings with the head of housing and also attends meetings of the tenants and leaseholders federations. Members are actively involved in monitoring progress. The portfolio holders sign off progress reports against the business plan before these are presented to cabinet. The portfolio holder for housing also receives regular updates on delivery against the DHS.
- 135 There are adequate performance and risk management systems in place on the delivery of the council's plan for DHS. BVPIs, LPIs and management PIs are periodically produced for officers and members. Tenants and leaseholders federations' members receive periodic monitoring information. Individual project management is done through the use of project management software and integrated into the corporate risk register.
- 136 The council has a good performance and contract management arrangements for the delivery of its DHS and housing investment programme. There are also good staff performance arrangements in place. Staff appraisals are carried out on an annual basis and staff objectives are directly linked to the housing strategy action plan.
- 137 The council has developed a comprehensive risk management register that is used to manage risk reductions. The plan initially identified 36 category one risks, risk management plans were developed and so reduced the category one risks to four. None of these relate to housing services.

- 138 The council seeks learning from others, including beacon councils. As a result it introduced choice in kitchen and bathroom improvement programmes and started to use hand held computers to update housing stock condition through inspection visits. It also applies learning from inspections, audit reports and peer reviews. It has learned from the Housing Corporation, for example postal surveys of tenants. Other examples of learning from previous experience include emergency planning arrangements. There are member learning activities that allow members to visit other successful authorities on specific activities and learn from peers.
- 139 Epping Forest also shares its experience with others, following the assessment of its housing strategy as 'fit for purpose' it has been approached by other councils seeking advice. The council has demonstrated learning from its tenants and has made changes as a result for example the recently introduced annual stock condition survey update inspections.

**Summary of decent homes standard diagnostic judgements and strengths / weaknesses**

Area of focus	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
<p>What is the council trying to achieve in relation to the standard? Does the council know the condition of their housing stock and their compliance with the decent homes standard?</p>	<p>A</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear ambition to meet DHS by 2010</li> <li>• Good knowledge of stock and homes failing the DHS</li> <li>• Comprehensive stock options appraisal</li> <li>• Good engagement with tenants representatives in developing options</li> <li>• Clear links between HRA business plan, housing strategy, asset management plan and DHS delivery plan</li> <li>• 'Fit for purpose' achieved for HRA business plan and housing strategy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low level of interest or engagement with individual tenants</li> </ul>
<p>Is the council delivering its plans to meet the decent homes standard?</p>	<p>A</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resources and work programmes clearly identified; 5 year and 30 year business plan in place</li> <li>• DHS 2004 target already met and on target to meet 2010 standard</li> <li>• Modern procurement, including Egan and good approach to partnership and contract management.</li> <li>• Sufficient financial capacity to delivery DHS and upgrade stock above minimum standard</li> <li>• Top quartile delivery on DHS, non-decent reductions and urgent repairs completion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Below average on SAP rating</li> </ul>
<p>How well does the council monitor its progress and how effectively does this feed into future strategies and plans?</p>	<p>A</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SMART DHS delivery plans</li> <li>• Robust monitoring arrangements and member and officer levels</li> <li>• Residents groups involved in monitoring delivery against DHS</li> <li>• Good performance and contract management</li> <li>• Learning from others and sharing good practice</li> <li>• Clear future plans for preventing homes from becoming non-decent</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Decent homes standard diagnostic assessment judgement</b></p>		<p>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; and
- d = very high.

An overall assessment is then be made for each diagnostic as follows:

- A = very low need for improvement focus;
- B = low need for improvement focus;
- C = high need for improvement focus; and
- D = very high need for improvement focus.

## Appendix 2 – Public space diagnostic assessment

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

- 140 There is a low risk of service failure or poor outcomes in this aspect of the council's services.
- 141 The council understands the issues it faces in balancing the economic, social and environmental pressures it faces. It demonstrates leadership and increases its capacity by participating in regional partnerships formed to manage these issues. To 'Maintain the special character and advantage of the district, and address local environmental issues' is a key aim of the council.
- 142 The council has applied consistent effort to preserve the urban/rural, town/village/countryside balance of the district. For some time it has been recognised that regional planning requirements would demand significantly more rapid housing development in the district than has been the case to date. However, the recent regional planning guidance (RPG14) expects significantly more than was anticipated and the council is now reviewing its position and developing its response.
- 143 The council is taking such steps as it can to meet the need for more affordable housing through the planning process. House prices in the district are high which creates difficulty in attracting new 'key worker' residents to the area. Over the last three years a total of around 400 additional affordable homes have been introduced to the local housing market however this falls well short of annual additional affordable home requirement of 642 identified in a recent housing needs survey. Development opportunities are limited. The council has delivered against its past targets to ensure that all new housing developments include a significant proportion of affordable homes (20 per cent up to 2000 and 30 per cent since). Amendments to the adopted local plan are now being progressed and, in recognition of the increasing demand, seek to raise the proportion of affordable homes on new developments to 40 per cent.
- 144 The council has been able to secure a number of quality building developments that have addressed environmental sustainability in design and construction and there are examples of both housing and commercial development throughout the district. Section 106 agreements have been used to good effect to secure affordable homes and offer both environmental and community safety benefits. The council's town centre enhancement schemes are good; they have been undertaken after local consultation and with green travel plans and energy efficiency in mind.
- 145 The progress made towards achieving statutory planning turn around targets is mixed. When last assessed against nationally agreed criteria (2002/03), the percentage of major applications processed in the target time of 13 weeks was only 27 per cent and represents poor performance against the national average of 44 per cent and the government target of 60 per cent. The percentage of minor applications processed in the target time of 8 weeks was 55 per cent which is average when compared against other councils but remains short of the government target of 65 per cent. Other applications were being processed at a

better than average rate (78 per cent) and is nearing government expectations of 80 per cent.

- 146 In other respects the comparative performance in planning and development control activities is also mixed. Encouragingly, above average levels of homes (87 per cent: 2001/02) have been developed on brownfield sites and the council demonstrates average performance when judged against national criteria for best practice (2001/02). However the costs of the service, at £16.44 per head of population, are high, reflecting the use of agency staff to address recruitment and retention difficulties in the region, and the time taken to process land searches has been very poor. In 2002/03 it deteriorated so that only 29 per cent were turned around in 10 days (against a national average of 97 per cent). The council has addressed this issue and more recent information indicates a radical improvement in performance which now approaches national average performance levels.
- 147 Capacity and performance management issues are impacting upon the council's ability to achieve high quality services in some aspects of managing the built environment. For example, opportunities for energy conservation at the recently completed leisure centre in Loughton were abandoned as project costs rose and performance against a code of practice and prioritised targets in development control enforcement activities is not being monitored.
- 148 Good progress has been made towards offering people with disabilities access to the council's buildings but plans for further activities are not finalised. 85 per cent of the council buildings are now accessible which represents top quartile performance among district councils. Funding for further minor work has been allocated but plans to deal with all aspects of the remaining 15 per cent have not been agreed leaving the council at risk of not being fully compliant with the legal requirement for full access by October 2004.
- 149 The council operates a variety of planned maintenance regimes which ensure the quality of the built and natural environment is maintained. Street furniture and pedestrian areas are inspected and maintained within standards operated by the council on behalf of its county colleagues under a highways agency agreement. Much of the open space in the district is operated by town and parish councils, or in the case of Epping Forest, the City of London Corporation, leaving relatively little under the direct responsibility of the district council. That which remains is maintained under the country care programme. The scheme is co-ordinated by council staff who have the support of volunteers to maintain woodland, flood management and other open areas. Local nature reserves offer walkways to enable public access (some boarded to cater for people with disabilities) – achievements that have been recognised by national bodies.
- 150 Members of the public can easily report matters of concern to the council in person or by telephone, but not widely by other electronic forms. The council's website offers details to enable direct dialling to staff and departments. Out of hours the council's main switchboard number is staffed by 24 hour emergency personnel who have access to a comprehensive advice and response capability.
- 151 The council has taken only limited action to ensure staff are visible and accessible to the public and though it has a scheme for reporting maintenance issues identified during everyday work, the process is rarely being used. Animal and parking wardens are the only council staff to wear uniforms. A scheme for

reporting maintenance or other issues staff might identify during their day to day travels has been introduced but is receiving little usage. The council is not maximising its opportunities to identify maintenance issues in the local environment.

- 152 The council is highly proactive in addressing issues of local concern in conjunction with other agencies. Flooding is a high risk threat to some areas of the district and the council has invested heavily, both in monetary and human resource terms, in addressing this in partnership with the Environment Agency. Flood management schemes have been introduced to areas of highest risk and have since been developed into nature reserves to offer enhanced community facilities and bio-diversity.
- 153 The council is not always supporting its commitment to the wider environmental agenda within a strategic framework. An air quality strategy has been adopted and surveys conducted. Proposed amendments to the local plan address environmental issues and the council has introduced a number of measures and initiatives to contribute to energy conservation, for example improvements to its housing stock. This means that the council is taking steps to reduce harm to the environment but it does not have a climate change or carbon dioxide strategy and it has not progressed towards adopting an accredited environmental management scheme.

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

- 154 There is a high risk of service failure or poor outcomes in this aspect of the council's services.
- 155 The public is satisfied with waste collection arrangements in the district but the council is not effectively addressing all aspects of the waste hierarchy. When last assessed in 2000/01, public satisfaction levels for waste collection were 87 per cent, marginally above what might be predicted for the district. A number of actions have been taken with a view to reducing the amount of waste generated in the district. These include promotional literature, articles in its free newspaper, support to a local furniture reuse agency and support to a county driven education campaign. However, the quantity of waste collected has increased year on year. It now stands at 415kg per head of population, more than average when compared to other councils.
- 156 The council has a good recycling service. In 2002/03 the council recycled 21 per cent of the waste collected. Recycling rates have continued to improve and this year 25 per cent of waste collected has been recycled or composted (council's own figures). Public satisfaction levels for recycling when last assessed in 2000/01 were 74 per cent comfortably exceeding the 69 per cent that might be predicted for the district.
- 157 The council does not have explicit plans to improve recycling, or meet statutory recycling standards. Despite being a stated aim of the council, the statutory target for 2003/04 (28 per cent) will not be met and the target for 2005/06 (36 per cent) is at risk. The council is a supporter of the county wide waste management advisory board, and has pledged support for stretched targets. However, it has not developed a waste management strategy and the expected benefits of a newly secured waste contract, have not materialised. There is a risk that the previous improvements in recycling rates will not be maintained.

- 158 Public spaces are generally kept clean and tidy throughout the day. 'Hot spots' are subject to particular attention and a 'hit squad' responds to urgent needs. In the year ending December 2003 almost 2000 vehicles were reported as abandoned. More than 50 per cent of them were removed from the district, the majority within the target times of one or three days, depending upon the nature of vehicle. Fly tipping in rural locations is recognised as a particular problem with over 800 incidents being reported in 2003. 90 per cent were removed within the target of one day. The council removes graffiti within 14 days on any surface visible to the public. Racially offensive material is removed within one day. Public satisfaction levels when last assessed in 2000/01 were 70 per cent.
- 159 A lack of co-ordination occasionally undermines the quality of service offered by the council. Verges have sometimes been mown by the in-house grounds maintenance service before litter has been collected by the contractor for street cleansing. The council is aware of the need to improve the integration between these services and is taking steps to address the problem.
- 160 The council has adopted the enforcement concordat and within its environmental services section has used CCTV equipment in an effort to capture evidence of fly tipping. To date no successful prosecutions have been secured but anecdotally reported reductions in the number of incidents at monitored locations indicate some measure of success. In other aspects, education activities have proved sufficiently effective and the council has not needed to take enforcement measures.

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

- 161 There is a low risk of service failure or poor outcomes in this aspect of the council's services. To 'Create safer communities' is a key aim of the council.
- 162 The council clearly understands the community safety issues of the district. It demonstrates leadership in its support to, and membership of, the crime and disorder reduction partnership (CDRP) and is respected by partners for the commitment shown to community safety matters. Together with the other agencies involved, the council has successfully completed detailed crime audits before launching community safety strategies in 1999, and the most recent covering the period 2002 to 2005. Issues addressed in the current strategy reflect both national and local priorities including property crime, drugs and anti-social behaviour.
- 163 With its partners, the council has developed clear action plans describing how the issues of the current strategy will be addressed and the outcomes sought. Lead agencies are identified and progress towards targets is monitored. The 2002 strategy includes a review of the achievements secured during the life of the previous strategy and identifies among other benefits to the community a 15.9 per cent reduction in overall crime in 2001/02.
- 164 The council effectively leads on a number of initiatives and chairs the hate crime action group. The objectives undertaken by the council are specifically targeted and are progressing in accordance with identified timescales. 250 council staff have been trained to receive reports of racially motivated or homophobic crime in a sensitive way and a hate crime incident review panel has been established to review emerging trends. The levels of reported racially motivated incidents in the

district are high reflecting the confidence the community has in the processes delivered.

- 165 The council works effectively with other agencies in addressing community safety issues. For example, together with the police, the council sponsors women's safety courses where fear of crime is discussed and tactical options offered to reduce the likelihood of becoming a victim. Leaflets and support documents have been jointly produced to offer general crime prevention advice and specific guidance to the victims of domestic violence. Real support is offered through a care-line 24 hour telephone service and with multi-agency co-operation security devices have been fitted to homes to reduce the risk of the elderly becoming the victim of a crime. Resources have been pooled to create a post to offer administrative support to the CDRP and its action groups.
- 166 Information is effectively exchanged with other agencies. Together with its partners the council has successfully obtained four anti-social behaviour orders and a number of acceptable behaviour contracts. This could not have been achieved without effective information exchange at a case by case level. To supplement this, the council participates in a county wide scheme, the community profiler, which enables the collation and analysis of bulk depersonalised information.
- 167 The council is not maximising the learning it might gain from its community safety activities. There are examples where departments within the council, for example development control, have produced community safety related guidance and taken positive action in an effort to reduce crime and disorder. However community safety is not systematically mainstreamed throughout the council and an audit of the community safety related actions has not been taken. The council is not identifying its weaknesses and opportunities for doing more in its approach to community safety.

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

- 168 There is a low risk of service failure or poor outcomes in this aspect of the council's services.
- 169 Epping Forest district council has a long established reputation for ensuring an extensive provision for young people. A youth officer has been employed for over five years and citizenship, leisure, sport and cultural activities are well co-ordinated with the arrangements offered by the county council.
- 170 The needs and expectations of young people are captured in a variety of ways including users surveys, representation on the county youth parliament, the district youth council and an annual youth day. The youth council has been operating for the past three years and membership is now beginning the wane. The district council is conscious of the risk this represents and has plans to re-launch the council with a residential weekend, a technique that proved highly effective in 2001.
- 171 The council's facilities and the initiatives it delivers offer a wide range of activities. Leisure centres are distributed throughout the district and concessionary admission fees are offered to young people. An outreach scheme offers an introduction to arts and cultural activities for schools, local clubs and other

centres. Sufficient momentum for the participants to continue without support is established before other areas of the district are addressed.

- 172 Inter agency working is particularly effective in offering summer schemes. Each year, with its partners, the council offers a number of schemes. These include capacity for over 12,000 attendances on schemes for under-12s and a summer university for 13 to 19 year olds. The university event offers a timetable of sport, arts, drama, cultural and skills development opportunities, created in consultation with the members of the youth council to ensure the provision matches what young people want. In conjunction with the national association for the care and rehabilitation of offenders and other agencies social cohesion is addressed by ensuring that disaffected and disadvantaged young people are offered maximum opportunity to be involved in the scheme.
- 173 All the activities offered in the district are well advertised through brochures, 'flyers' in schools and on the council's website. Interest usually exceeds capacity indicating the effectiveness of the current promotion strategies. Some participation information is gathered but this is not comprehensive and as a result the council is missing an opportunity to ensure its provision reaches all sections of its community.
- 174 The council is particularly keen to promote citizenship. In addition to supporting the educational curriculum with visits and presentations in schools, a number of sessions have been offered in the council chamber where politicians, officers and young people have held mock debates to discuss matters of local interest.
- 175 The council's child protection policies are not comprehensive. In the leisure services, the policy is based on a countywide model and addresses personnel vetting and the management of reported incidents. As a basis for policy and practice this is sound but at present appropriate briefing and training is not guaranteed for all volunteers involved in some of the council's activities and other aspects of council activity have not been systematically reviewed to identify other areas where child protection issues may arise.

**Summary of public space diagnostic judgements and strengths / weaknesses**

Area of focus	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
How well does the council contribute to the management of the physical environment?	b	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Used planning measures to deliver affordable housing, encourage quality developments and secure community benefits</li> <li>Comprehensive out of hours' emergency service.</li> <li>Top quartile progress (85%) towards access for people with disabilities.</li> <li>Country care service to maintain open spaces.</li> <li>Flood alleviation measures and town centre enhancement schemes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mixed comparative performance on planning and development control</li> <li>Limited cross departmental fault reporting</li> <li>Lack of strategic framework and resource for some aspects of the sustainability agenda</li> </ul>
Does the council help keep the locality clean?	c	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Good recycling performance</li> <li>Fly tipping, abandoned vehicles and graffiti removal.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No waste management strategy</li> <li>Limited action on reduction and waste levels are rising.</li> <li>Will not meet 2003 recycling target and 2005 target is at risk.</li> </ul>
Does the council work with partners to improve community safety?	b	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Respected member of CDRP</li> <li>Lead effectively on appropriate aspects of strategy</li> <li>Crime rate reductions in 2001/02</li> <li>Effective joint working, pooling resources and information exchange</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Not exploiting mainstreaming opportunities</li> </ul>
Does the council contribute to activities to positively engage children and young people?	b	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Commitment to providing for the needs and wants of young people</li> <li>Wide variety of citizenship, leisure and cultural multi agency provision</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited use of participation data to ensure all sectors of the community access the provision.</li> <li>Child protection policies and practice are not comprehensive</li> </ul>
<b>Public space diagnostic assessment judgement</b>		<b>B</b>	

**Scoring key**

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

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

## Appendix 3 – Appointed auditor assessment

176 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	4	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	3	Ethical framework Governance arrangements Treasury management Prevention and detection of fraud and corruption
Financial statements	4	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

177 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

178 Overall, we found that Epping Forest District Council's HB and CTB service was providing a **fair towards good** performance. The authority's current performance demonstrates a number of strengths. These include:

- ◆ annual council and service plans setting out achievements, aims and targets;
- ◆ a clear policy and strategy covering the benefits service and counter-fraud work;
- ◆ good levels of customer service and a customer charter setting aims in this area;
- ◆ full compliance with the requirements of the verification framework;
- ◆ Investor in People accreditation for training;
- ◆ current top quartile performance in most areas of claims processing;
- ◆ fraud awareness sessions for benefits and housing staff and feedback on outcome of fraud referrals;
- ◆ analysis of fraud referrals including cost effectiveness;
- ◆ successful prosecutions publicised internally and externally;
- ◆ identifying and making appropriate decisions on the recovery of overpayments; and
- ◆ very close to standard in most areas of performance standards.

179 However there are some areas where Epping Forest District Council needs to develop further to fully meet the BFI and Department for Work and Pensions' (the Department's) performance standards framework. These include:

- ◆ compliance with the requirements of the Race Relations Act;
- ◆ improving access to the benefits service for those with specific needs;
- ◆ improving the monitoring of payments on account;

- ◆ revising the current claim form;
- ◆ adoption of formal liaison arrangements with landlords;
- ◆ improving the level of assurance provided by internal audit; and
- ◆ agreeing an overpayment policy and putting in place reports for members on the level and age of outstanding debt.

### **Proven capacity to improve**

180 We assessed Epping Forest District Council's proven capacity to improve as **good**. The authority was able to demonstrate the following positive aspects:

- ◆ a positive attitude towards achieving change and securing improvement;
- ◆ clear aims and objectives and consultation with customers on outcomes;
- ◆ evidence of taking tough decisions and addressing problems; and
- ◆ a marked improvement in the levels of service provided by the benefits service over the last three years.

181 However, the following areas led us to question the extent to which Epping Forest District Council was able to prove its capacity to improve:

- ◆ more needs to be done to engage members;
- ◆ setting individual targets to ensure overall aims are achieved; and
- ◆ some uncertainty over the impact of the new computer system.

182 We would like to thank Epping Forest District Council's staff, particularly the assistant head of finance, for their assistance and co-operation with the assessment process.

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

## **Appendix 5 – Framework for Comprehensive Performance Assessment**

- 184 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.
- 185 The main elements of the assessment were:
- ◆ a self-assessment completed by the council;
  - ◆ accredited peer challenge to inform the council's self-assessment;
  - ◆ a corporate assessment of the council's overall effectiveness in supporting services to deliver improvements;
  - ◆ an assessment of the council's service delivery performance through two diagnostic assessments on:
    - ◆ management of public space;
    - ◆ progress in meeting the decent homes standard;
    - ◆ Benefit Fraud Inspectorate's (BFI) assessment of benefit services;
  - ◆ appointed auditor assessments of performance on each of the main elements of the code of audit practice; and
  - ◆ audited performance indicators, inspection reports and plan assessments.
- 186 The assessment for Epping Forest District Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 23 February 2004 to 27 February 2004.
- 187 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.