

DRAFT CPA PROGRESS SUBMISSION FOR THE AUDIT COMMISSION

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report introduces supporting evidence which will be used as part of the Council's supporting submission for its CPA progress assessment.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 The Audit Commission will be undertaking a CPA Progress Assessment Inspection of the Council in October, although dates have yet to be finalised. It is hoped that the Inspection will be relatively "light touch", lasting no more than 2 to 3 days and involving our Relationship Manager, Mr Ian Davidson and one other Inspector.
- 2.2 Ian Davidson, through his work with and knowledge of the Authority, already has an insight into the progress being made but the inspection and subsequent report, which will be published in December, will give the Audit Commission's formal opinion on the progress we have made as an Authority since the original CPA Inspection and subsequent report, which was published last September.
- 2.3 In advance of the Inspection in October, the Authority needs to provide a short, formal written submission and supporting evidence to the Audit Commission by next week. Officers have been working on the papers for submission and the evidence required was discussed at last Thursday's CPA Improvement Panel meeting, attended by the Leader and the Chief Executive.

3 DETAILED CONSIDERATIONS

- 3.1 One of the key background papers to be submitted is attached as Appendix 1. It is still very much a work in progress and was considered by last week's Improvement Panel, chaired by Mr Ian Davidson, who suggested a number of amendments to the document. The Council will also have to present a short written submission providing an update to scene setting (max of 1 side of A4) plus a short paper addressing the four key questions (again, max of 1 side of A4 for each question) around:
- What is the Council trying to achieve? (Ambition, Prioritisation and Focus.)

- How has the Council set about delivering its priorities for improvement? (Capacity, Performance Management.)
- What improvements has the Council achieved to date? (Achievement in the Quality of Service, Achievement of Improvement, Investment.)
- In the light of what the Council has learnt to date, what does it plan to do next? (Learning, Future Plans.)

3.2 A draft of the short paper will be tabled at the meeting.

4 RECOMMENDATION

4.1 That Members consider and comment on the supporting document as outlined in Appendix 1 and then give their views on aspects to be included under the four key questions outlined above.

Paul Warren

Chief Executive

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KEY ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED HIGHLIGHTED IN CPA INSPECTION REPORT

Ref.	Inspectors' Comment	What we've done since February 2004
1	Ambition	
1.1	Overall, the council lacks ambition. It does not have an approved corporate vision and its motto 'our heritage – our future' is not a clear expression of the council's ambitions for itself or its communities	<p>The Council has now articulated its Vision – “To be the best place in Essex to live, work and visit” and in the context of Thames Gateway South Essex, - “to be the Green part of the Gateway”. This vision is now being carried forward into the Council's strategic documentation and translated into actions. It is also being taken up with Partner organisations and developed in the context of a review of the Community Strategy.</p> <p>Further work is being done, as highlighted in the CPA Improvement Plan, around Visioning. Capacity Building Funding has been applied for to facilitate this – decision as yet to be confirmed although recently advised that it will be forthcoming. Nonetheless, progress has been made with Members around “fleshing out” key actions under the broad vision. A member session was held in July and a further session is planned for 21st September, to be followed by consultation with the community around the possible priorities planned for action. This will then be fed into the 2006/2007 budget process.</p>
1.2	Developing ambition has yet to be translated into robust plans for action	See above

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1.3	<i>Progress on the LSP has been slow</i>	The LSP demonstrates a good level of partnership commitment with ownership of the Community Strategy and accompanying Action Plan. The LSP will be holding an Awayday session in September (Sept 23 rd) to review the Strategy and Action Plan and the operation of the LSP. There has been some progress towards joint operation where appropriate with the Castle Point LSP.
1.4	Community Strategy has a number of weaknesses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no overarching cohesive statement of intent • the ambitions are not specific • no clear outcome based targets • action plans are insufficiently robust to address issues raised by the public • difficult to see how aspirations to develop tourism are translated into actions 	The comments of the CPA team were on a draft of the Community Strategy prior to finalisation and agreement by the LSP and subsequent publication. However, the LSP recognises the current approved strategy and accompanying Action Plan can be improved upon. After a year of monitoring progress on the Action Plan, an "AwayDay" is now planned for September (see 3 above).
1.5	Six corporate objectives are broad areas covering all aspects of the council's work and are not specific or outcome focussed	We have done much work through the budget process and refining the content of our Performance Plan to ensure more specific actions with outcomes. A comparison of the content of our Performance Plan over the past 3 years will evidence the progress made.
1.6	Ambition limited and influenced by a perceived unfairness of the level of grant funding	There is a balance to be struck to ensure that our aspirations are achievable over a period. Through mechanisms such as partnership working for example, we have demonstrated a

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		capacity to deliver key projects, e.g. Rayleigh Leisure Centre, Rayleigh Windmill, etc.
1.7	The council aims to meet legislative requirements and no more with targets set to meet the minimum standard	The plans and actions agreed through the Budget Process and contained in our last two Performance Plans demonstrate that we have addressed this perception e.g. 59% of PIs in the top two quartiles in 2003/2004, compared to 45% in 2002/2003. Also, for example, within the Essex Waste Project, recycling aspirational targets are to exceed the Government set targets.
1.8	Targets are not ambitious, in many cases not aiming for top quartile	See above. See also the work done/underway via the CPA Improvement Plan in terms of Council Tax/Housing Benefits and Homelessness. All Revenue and Benefits targets now aim for top quartile performance.
1.9	The overall lack of ambition means that services will not improve at the same rate as more ambitious councils	See above
1.10	Many current plans are not founded on a robust assessment of need	The latest plan produced by the Council since the CPA inspection in February 2004 – the Housing Strategy – has been based on an assessment of need.
1.11	Strategies and policies are insufficiently explicit about the council's approach to specific groups in the community such as young people or the elderly, or how it intends to deliver on issues such as social inclusion	Whilst much work has been done since February 2004, e.g. in relation to elderly persons, children and young people, this is an area for further policy development and planned actions – in line with emerging national policies, County Council plans and actions, etc. However, can demonstrate growing partnership engagement e.g. CYPSP, development of supported housing

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		schemes.
1.12	The council is not addressing the forecasted trends in community demographics in the medium to long term	The Council is addressing this through emerging strategic documentation e.g. Vision and Corporate Strategy, review of the Community Strategy, the Local Development Framework, Housing Strategy, etc.

Prioritisation

2.1	The council has not ranked objectives to identify which are the most important, and non-priorities are not identified as such	Priorities and non-priorities are now identified through the budget process and our budget awaydays.
2.2	Many 'key priorities' are not expressed in measurable terms and many are not outcome focused	Key priorities for action have been rationalised and becoming "SMARTER", as demonstrated by the content of the Performance Plan over the past 2 years – 2004/2005 and 2005/2006.
2.3	Priorities are not based on meaningful consultation with local people about the relationship between council tax levels and service delivery	Further consultation with the local community is planned around the identification of key actions as part of the visioning exercise, and this will include some reference to relative resource levels, choices, etc, which will be fed into the 2006/2007 budget process. Also, the Leader of the Council is about to embark on a programme of "open surgeries" across the District to further sample/test public opinion in the autumn. The first surgery is planned for 8 th October in Great Wakering and will be a joint

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		event with County Cllr. Roy Pearson.
2.4	Councillors do not accept the need to develop such a dialogue as they feel empowered through the democratic process to act on their residents' behalf, but as a result may be acting upon incomplete information and risking poor decision-making	See above. Also, Councillors will be maintaining a log of issues raised by constituents (first draft under discussion with the Leader).
2.5	The council's priorities are largely focused on local issues and are not balanced with national priorities	Our budget process over the last two years, the priorities identified and the content of our last two Performance Plans, not to mention the focus given within the CPA Improvement Plan, demonstrates a balance between national and local priorities. An analysis of expenditure would also indicate this point.
2.6	The effectiveness of communication about council plans is mixed. Staff are well informed and demonstrate ownership of council priorities. Stakeholders and councillors are less clear	An element of Member Training and Development has been developed and implemented which focuses on the Council's Plans, priorities and actions and the linkages to the Council's budget process, to ensure greater clarity amongst members. Similarly, a variety of mechanisms are now employed to ensure key partner and stakeholder awareness of the Council's plans and actions e.g. work around the Council's Housing Option Appraisal process.

Focus

3.1	The selection of policies and services for attention is not based	Most of the focus since the CPA Inspection and report has been
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	on a systematic analysis of local need, or a balancing of national and local policy requirements	on the delivery of the CPA Improvement Plan and making progress on the areas identified in it.
3.2	The council often attributes project slippage or performance issues in services to a lack of capacity, particularly government funding levels, and accepts this rather than focusing on resolving it	<p>Movement around Performance indicators in key service areas indicates that issues are being resolved.</p> <p>We use both Project Planning (PRINCE) and Service Action Plans to help in this task.</p>
3.3	Effort is not necessarily proportionate to its potential impact or what matters most to local people	The Council has a high public satisfaction rating locally with little negative publicity in the local press.
3.4	The availability of funding is a critical factor in moving things forward in Rochford and has a disproportionate impact on the council's focus and decision making	<p>The Council has worked hard over the past 12-18 months in moving forward on a range of both national and local priorities e.g. national – recycling; housing option appraisal; local – Rayleigh Leisure Centre; Rayleigh Windmill.</p> <p>The CPA Improvement Plan includes a key element around Member Training and Development. In the agreed programme, which is now being implemented, there are specific sections around decision making, chairing, leadership, scrutiny, role of a Councillor, etc, taken from the IDeA modern members programme.</p>

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3.5	Committee meetings are not efficient and effective. Meetings are not managed well and there is sometimes poor chairing and an absence of appropriate challenge of executive decisions	See above. Also a key focus of the CPA Improvement Plan relates to the review of the Overview and Scrutiny process which is currently underway.

Capacity

4.1	The five-year budget strategy is not risk assessed and is dependent upon an assumed nine per cent year on year increase in council tax	The Budget Strategy is now amended in line with Government controls. It does not now assume a nine per cent year on year increase.
4.2	Efficiency savings are not systematically identified as part of the annual budget setting process, and targets are not set for efficiency savings within service areas	This has now been largely superseded by "Gershon" and the process now associated with that. To date, we have identified £304,970 cashable and £124,230 non-cashable under that process against a target for 2005/2006 of £270,000, half of which must be cashable.
4.3	The council is unable to demonstrate that it is using all its resources effectively	The Council has the lowest spend per head of resident population of all the Essex Districts and one of the highest resident satisfaction rates. Also, the Council has retendered its main service contracts in the last five years.
4.4	The council does not make effective use of charges for services	The Council reviews its fees and charges on an annual basis; other than car parking charges, which are reviewed every two years. This reference largely relates to the free home pick up of

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		white goods and heavy domestic refuse, which to date the Council has decided not to charge for, on the basis that to do so might encourage fly tipping. However, the matter is kept under review and a further report on charging for bulky goods collections is scheduled for October.
4.5	The council's capacity to deliver its priorities is limited by problems with staff recruitment and retention and levels of sickness absence	Key areas of staff recruitment and retention have been addressed e.g. Council Tax/Housing Benefit, and new sickness absence policies have been introduced, which are leading to a decline in overall sickness absence.
4.6	The new political arrangements in Rochford do not make best use of councillor capacity. There are three overview and scrutiny committees and unusually, in Rochford, all 39 councillors are on the planning committee	Key elements of the CPA Improvement Plan are a review of the Overview and Scrutiny process and a review of the operation and decision making of the Planning Services Committee. Both the reviews are underway.
4.7	Despite being encouraged, some councillors have not updated their training in planning matters since May 2002. This arrangement does not follow best practice, and introduces risks around the ability to focus, the quality of decision making and probity	See above. Also, planning remains a key subject of the agreed annual Member Training and Development Programme. The role, composition and responsibilities of the Planning Services Committee are being reviewed as part of the CPA Improvement Plan.

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Performance Management

5.1	Active performance management is patchy – the development of effective performance management in services is not consistent across the council	Improvement in key target areas over past 18 months e.g. housing benefit, homelessness, recycling, sickness absence, would indicate a more targetted approach to performance management. However, improving our current Performance Management systems remains a key element of our CPA Improvement Plan.
5.2	Although the performance framework is in place, there are gaps in the available data which means that the council is unable to effectively track its progress against high level ambitions	High level ambitions are now tracked through a report to the Policy and Finance Committee on a quarterly basis detailing progress against the actions identified in Chapter 7 of the Performance Plan.
5.3	Risk management is under-developed – no corporate child protection policy in place and the new Cherry Orchard Country Park had not been assessed for public safety and emergency procedures despite having a newly created lake	A Corporate Child Protection Policy is in place and the lake at Cherry Orchard Country Park has been assessed for public safety and emergency procedures.
5.4	Although customers may receive a good standard of service, they do not know what to expect	The Council's key service standards are highlighted in the Council's main reception areas and included on the Authority's website. In addition, residents satisfaction levels remain high relative to other authorities. For example, in Planning there is a Planning Charter, Enforcement Policy and Building Control Service Standards – all of which provide the customer with

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		information on what to expect.

Achievement Of Service Quality

6.1	Performance in key areas that affect the most vulnerable, like community housing and benefits, is weak	There have been demonstrable improvements in the areas mentioned since the CPA Inspection and publication of the Report. Measures have been taken to improve performance in Housing Benefits – now most indicators in top quartile.
6.2	Only 18 per cent of households are currently offered kerbside recycling, the weight of rubbish collected per household is above the median and the number of missed bins is high	<p>Kerbside recycling is now being rolled out across the District. Already 85% households are covered. By January 2006, 98% of households across the District will be covered by the kerbside recycling scheme. In addition, an optional green waste “buy in” scheme was introduced in July. As a result, the recycling rate has increased to 12.31% for 2004/2005 even though the expansion had only been in place since November 2004.</p> <p>The number of missed bins has been reduced to 71 per 100,000 collections and is now below the target set.</p>
6.3	Overall appearance of the district is affected by litter, particularly on marginal land adjacent to roads and commercial areas which the council is not directly responsible for	Public satisfaction around the cleanliness of the District remains high and amongst the top quartile Authorities. The key site highlighted by the Inspection team at Cherry Orchard has now been cleared.

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6.4	Abandoned cars are not removed quickly enough and the council is not using its powers effectively to deal with fly tipping or dog fouling	<p>Abandoned cars are now cleared within 24 hours from when they are legally allowed to be removed, although the volume remains relatively low. Flytipping turnaround time averaged 1.12 days against a target of 2 days in 2004/2005.</p> <p>The Council has made no prosecutions re dog fouling but has invested in more dog bins and collection frequencies. Dog fouling is only one of the issues being tackled in an Environmental Campaign being launched across the District on 12 September 2005 following further investment by Members in this area for 2005/06.</p>
6.5	Overall service offered to disadvantaged groups is mixed. Disabled access to council buildings is poor, and the council does not use consistent charging and concessions to target social inclusion	<p>Disabled access to Council buildings has now been addressed. The last disability access improvements to the offices will be complete in September.</p> <p>A 5 year funding plan for community transport is now in place. An extra £30,000 is devoted to taxi vouchers.</p>
6.6	Benefits' claimants having to wait too long for payments	Payments performance has improved to top quartile.
6.7	The council takes too long to deal with cases of homelessness	Homelessness performance has improved with nearly 97% of applications determined within target time since October 2004.
6.8	Fear of burglary remains a major concern	Fear of burglary is not a major concern. In the last audit work carried out prior to the preparation of the Crime and Disorder Reduction Strategy for 2005-2008, fear of burglary was not raised in the consultation carried out.

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6.9	The Crime and Disorder partnership has targeted initiatives such as a drug referral scheme and provision of a drop in centre for victims of domestic violence. These are well regarded but few have measurable targets so it is not always clear what is being achieved	Measurable targets have been incorporated into the Crime and Disorder Reduction Strategy 2005-2008.
6.10	The council has a high volume of unauthorised development cases to deal with. Currently there is a backlog of cases which means that unauthorised development is not being effectively controlled	The caseload is down to about 300 from a high of nearly 500. This has been achieved through weekly management clinics and monthly officer caseload reports. Additional temporary staff resources are also available.
6.11	The impact that the council is having on the local economy has not been assessed	Whilst this has not been systematically assessed, the Council has developed a number of mechanisms to improve its communications with the local business community. Through its own practices and procedures, it has also endeavoured to ensure the local business community engages with and responds to the challenges posed by "e" govt.
6.12	The presentation and content of the website is basic and not customer focused: the council is therefore not making the best use of this medium	The Council's website has been redesigned to improve its customer focus and in the latest SOCITIM assessment, has now been upgraded to a "Content Plus" website, the second from top category. The Pendleton Survey of planning websites ranks RDC at joint 36 out of 354 local planning authorities. "E forms" for on-line reporting will shortly be available.

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Achievement Of Improvement

7.1	The rate of improvement delivered is mainly incremental and is not significantly visible to the public	Significant visible improvements can be seen in terms of the development of the Council's leisure and cultural/community facilities, in partnership with Holmes Place, and the shopping centre enhancement work over a period, the latest of which relates to the refurbishment work in connection with Rayleigh Windmill and its environs in partnership with the National Trust, and further enhancements to Websters Way, Rayleigh.
7.2	There has been slow progress with the delivery of strategic projects and plans and many of the council's own targets were missed or behind schedule	The majority of the strategic projects looked at during the time of the CPA inspection are now complete or well advanced.
7.3	There are few areas where there is a track record of sustained improvements, and services to customers are vulnerable to a lack of capacity	There has been sustained improvement since the CPA inspection in the areas of Council Tax/Housing Benefit; Homelessness; Recycling and Housing Management
7.4	Despite having set a target to reduce the amount of waste collected, no effective action is being taken	Action has now been taken. Examples include kerbside recycling, green waste and yellow pages collection schemes in local schools. Recycling is actively promoted through schools campaign.
7.5	The council acknowledges the need to tackle missed bins but the	The number of missed bins figure has now been reduced to below the target set to 71 per 100,000 collections following a

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	number remains high	joint monitoring exercise with the Council's contractor to secure service improvement.
7.6	Council monitoring shows that cleanliness is below target in shopping and residential areas and also shows that it has fallen sharply in rural areas	The latest cleanliness figures show shopping, residents and rural areas all to be up on last year's figures with shopping areas above the target and residential and rural now only marginally below target. The rural target was revised to a higher standard as the previous target was being achieved consistently. Public satisfaction with cleanliness standards is in the top quartile of all authorities.
7.7	Time taken to process a new benefits' application has deteriorated	The performance in this area has improved from 42.75 to 23 days.
7.8	No successful prosecutions have resulted from the district's fixed CCTV installations and the fear of crime remains disproportionately high	Prosecutions with CCTV rest with the police. Fear of crime is actually low, based on the results from the latest consultation carried out for the 2005-2008 Crime and Disorder Reduction Strategy
7.9	Although the council has taken some action to integrate community safety into its day to day operations, it cannot demonstrate that it is complying with its obligations under S17 of the Crime and Disorder Act	The implications of the Crime and Disorder Act are now incorporated in induction sessions for all new staff. In addition, a cross Council officer working group has been set up by the Community Safety officer to ensure crime and disorder reduction issues across the Council are considered and to examine areas of best practice.
7.10	Progress in planning has been mixed. Whilst there has been a step change improvement in the speed of processing standard planning	For BV109, this year to date, we have exceeded the targets, though it is only for "other" applications that we have

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	applications, performance on major applications and issuing decision notices remain below the council's targets	<p>exceeded our more demanding local targets. We no longer have a specific target for issuing decision notices; this is part of the overall target figure. As ever; the determination of major applications within timescale is dependent very often on S106 agreements.</p> <p>The Planning website has been scored 17/21 on the Pendleton criteria, meaning that it is one of the top quartile sites in the county.</p>
7.11	The council has been slow to deliver solutions for highly visible derelict sites in Rochford town centre	The highly visible derelict sites in Rochford town centre are now being developed
7.12	Progress with the development of the Cherry Orchard Business Park has been slow. Currently the site is in an untidy state with abandoned vehicles and rubbish clearly visible from the road	This site is now tidy and clear of rubbish. Initial infrastructure works have been undertaken. A planning application related to details has now been submitted to the Council. Subject to approval, it is hoped that work will commence on site in the foreseeable future..

Investment

8.1	The council is investing in some service improvements but this is often opportunistic rather than planned and systematic to meet	Over the past 12 months, the focus of Council activity and investment has been on the Council's CPA Improvement Plan.
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	policy objectives	
8.2	The council is not investing in a modern property management system to enable it to plan housing investment efficiently and plans to make buildings accessible to disabled people will not meet the deadline of the Disability Discrimination Act	The Council's Housing Business Plan has been submitted and was approved by GoEast earlier this year. The Council's main buildings for public use are DDA compliant with the final scheme scheduled for completion this month (September). The property repairs management system has been upgraded and will include planning for Decent Homes in the system, and other property management data.
8.3	It has also been reluctant to invest its own resources in clear national priorities such as recycling	The Council's recycling performance has now improved in line with national policy, involving funding investment not just from Central Government but also additional investment from the Council. There has also been both financial and human resource committed to being an active partner in the strategy and procurement process with ECC and other District/Borough Councils in the County towards an integrated Waste Management Contract that would produce increased recycling levels. The Council has also invested its resources in other national priority areas like homelessness
8.4	A skills audit has not been carried out yet	A Workforce Development Plan has been approved and within that, the Skills Audit is scheduled for December.
8.5	Investment in the council's strategies, policies and internal systems is mixed, with uneven progress. It has developed a performance management and risk management framework, but these, together	We continue to work on this.

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	with the new political arrangements, are not yet fully effective	
8.6	The council has good financial systems and controls but its five-year financial plan is not fully risk assessed	The budget plan is now risk assessed
8.7	The council has recently produced cultural and homelessness strategies. However there is no detailed action plan to deliver the cultural strategy	The cultural action plan has yet to be finalised and presented to Members.
8.8	There is currently no private sector housing strategy or fuel poverty strategy, and the procurement strategy is out of date	The Procurement Strategy has been revised and updated in line with best practice. The Fit for Purpose housing strategy covers the strategic aspects of private sector housing and contains targets for action. A specific private sector strategy has been drafted and is being refined for submission to Council.
8.9	Progress in developing the local plan has been slow	The Local Plan has been progressed. The Inspector's report on the Local Plan Inquiry has just been received. It is anticipated that following appropriate reports to Committee, the Plan will be adopted by Spring 2006. Also, the Local Development Scheme has been approved and the development plan documents are progressing as per the timetable.
8.10	External challenge has been limited and the council has not responded positively in some cases – there is political resistance	External challenge/advise/guidance is now welcomed. Examples – Asset Management; housing; Council

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	from councillors	Tax/Housing Benefit. IDeA doing Member development and training and this includes a peer Councillor to provide external challenge. The Leader has been on an IDeA Leadership Development course.
8.11	Best value reviews provide the main focus for internal challenge but their effectiveness has been mixed	See above.

Learning

9.1	While there is evidence of learning within the council, this is predominantly ad hoc and not structured or systematic across the council	We have approved our Workforce Development Plan, achieved IIP recognition and best practice examples across the Council are presented to OMT.
9.2	It attributes slow progress and missed targets to a lack of capacity but it could do more to maximise this	See above
9.3	The council's communication and consultation strategies do not help it learn from engagement with its stakeholders. The communication strategy focuses on one-way communication and it is not clear how the council evaluates the success of its consultation programmes. The council does not always seek out learning from partners, users and other councils	See above. However, communication/consultation strategy still to be revised – included in the CPA Improvement Plan

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9.4	Internal communication is weak and the council makes limited use of cross- functional improvement teams. As a consequence good practice is not always shared effectively	Good practice now shared through presentations to OMT and establishment of staff newsletter
9.5	The council does not permit public speaking at the planning committee. The opportunity for learning from other councils and for learning and engagement with local people is missed	This is key area of work in the CPA Improvement Plan
9.6	There is little evidence so far that the peer review has resulted in change although a staff communications group has been set up to strengthen communication across the divisions of the authority	There is now a fortnightly staff newsletter; a staff sounding board group and an annual staff survey.