

Progress Assessment Report

December 2005



Progress Assessment Report

Rochford District Council

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Progress assessments

In 2002, Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) was introduced at single tier and county councils (ST&CCs), and at district councils in 2003/04, as a way of supporting councils to deliver improvements in services to local people.

CPA brought together existing information on service performance in councils with a corporate assessment of each council's ability to improve. This was used to reach an overall conclusion about whether a council was 'excellent', 'good', 'fair', 'weak' or 'poor'.

Those councils classified as 'poorly performing'¹, were the subject of formal engagement by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), and were required to produce a recovery/improvement plan following their CPA. Through its network of relationship managers, the Commission worked closely with the lead officials assigned by the ODPM in developing an appropriate monitoring programme for the recovery/improvement plan.

The progress assessment will measure the impact and sustainability of the Council's improvement activity. Where necessary, it will report on regress. The progress assessment is tailored to local circumstances, provides appropriate public assurance and contributes to improvement reporting. It will report an evidence based judgement on progress against the original corporate assessment criteria, but it will not give a score.

The progress assessment is part of the Commission's commitment to helping councils ensure continuous improvement to services for local people. It does this in the context of its strategic regulation principles which look to minimise the burden of regulation at the same time as maximising its impact. We are committed to working in partnership with other regulators and the ODPM in this aim.

¹ 'poorly performing' is defined as councils that were classified as 'poor' or 'weak' with a corporate assessment score of 1

Introduction

- 1 In September 2004 the Audit Commission published a Comprehensive Performance Assessment of Rochford District Council. This assessment categorised the Council as weak. The key strengths and weaknesses from this assessment are set out in Appendix 1.
- 2 This report presents an analysis of the Council's progress to date based on the council's implementation of its improvement and recovery plan and comparison with the baseline position of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment.

Summary and recommendations

- 3 Rochford District Council is progressing well in priority areas. It has clarified its vision and priorities and is developing plans to deliver future improvement.
- 4 As a result of consultation a clear long term vision has been developed. This is underpinned by priorities identified by key stakeholders, and by a series of specific medium and long term actions. These are linked to the budget setting process, and have been communicated to staff and key stakeholders.
- 5 The Council demonstrates community leadership and, with partners, is developing a new community plan. Officer and Councillor leadership is developing and effective. There is an improved and developing approach to user focus, accessibility and diversity.
- 6 Capacity has been increased through effective partnership working. Some key services are delivered effectively in partnership whilst others have been outsourced. The Council is open to being a facilitator as well as provider of services depending on local need and capacity. It has improved political capacity through a training and member development programme. It is also increasing staff capacity by reducing absence from work, implementing a robust appraisal system and developing staff.
- 7 Some previously poorly performing services have been improved. For example increased speed of payment and accuracy in the benefits service, higher level of waste recycling and improvements in the homelessness service. Despite limited capacity, some large projects have been delivered including a new leisure centre. The Council's Housing Strategy/Business Plan is judged to be 'fit for purpose' and good progress has been made in the options appraisal for the Council's housing stock. Customer access to the Council has also significantly improved.
- 8 Performance has generally improved between 2002/03 and 2004/05. The Council continues to report high levels of customer satisfaction, which is achieved at a below average spend per head of population.
- 9 The Council is developing as a learning organisation, both internally from staff and externally from other councils and agencies.
- 10 The Council does not yet have a Corporate Plan however many of the key elements are included in other documents such as '*Our Performance Plan*'. There are plans to produce a Corporate Plan in 2006 along with a Community Plan. The recently developed priorities are not supported by a corporate planning process and have inconsistent departmental approaches to planning delivery, which inhibits the certainty of delivering against the key actions supporting the priorities.
- 11 Performance management has improved but is still not fully effective. The Council has introduced quarterly performance monitoring and reviews some of the key priority actions. However, the information is not clear and it does not enable Councillors to easily identify progress against priorities and therefore manage performance effectively. The Council is currently unable to demonstrate value for money as it does not include a cost analysis of performance.

12 It is recommended that the Council:

- actively and promptly shares the findings of this progress assessment with staff;
- reports these findings to an appropriate public committee meeting; and
- uses the key findings as the basis for revising the recovery plan in conjunction with any direction from the Monitoring Board, (if one exists).

Context

The locality

- 13 Rochford is a relatively small district located in south east Essex. It is bounded by the river Crouch to the north and the urban areas of Southend and Castle Point to the south. The district has three towns, Rayleigh, Rochford and Hockley. Much of the remaining area is green belt with a large area around Foulness, largely under Ministry Of Defence control. London Southend Airport straddles between the district's southern boundary with Southend.
- 14 The district has a population of 78,900 people, living in 33,600 households. This is predicted to rise to 80,300 by 2011 with a forecasted large increase of those over the age of 85 years. People from black and minority ethnic communities represent 3.22 per cent of the population.
- 15 The area is relatively affluent ranking 316 out of 354 most deprived authorities nationally. The most deprived ward, Foulness and Great Wakering East ranks 2,680 of 8,414. 75.1 per cent of households are owner occupied which is the fourth highest in the country. Private renting accounts for 15.4 per cent. The Council's housing stock is currently 1,700 dwellings of which 665 are allocated to the elderly. House prices are higher than that across England and Wales.
- 16 Unemployment levels are below regional and national averages at 1.0 per cent. Sixty eight per cent of the workforce commute out of the area. Within the district only five businesses employ more than 250 staff. A small part of the district around Rochford and the airport falls within the Thames Gateway South Essex (TGSE) regeneration area. TGSE has developed an ambitious sub-regional agenda for growth, development and regeneration, and is delivering its vision through the TGSE partnership which Rochford has signed up to.

The Council

- 17 Rochford has been under a Conservative administration since May 2002, holding 32 of the 39 seats. Prior to this there were minority administrations in place involving the Liberal Democrats, Labour and Independents. New political management arrangements based on alternative committee structures were introduced in May 2002. There are three policy committees, mirrored by an equivalent overview and scrutiny committee, regulatory committees and a standards committee. This arrangement is under review. In May 2004 a new Leader and in May 2005 a new Deputy Leader were appointed.

- 18 The Council's management structure comprises the chief executive and two corporate directors making up the corporate management board (CMB), supported by six heads of service. The Council employs 227 full-time equivalent staff. Many of the Council's front line services are externalised. The revenue budget for 2004/05 is £8,468,800 (estimate), with low reserves and a capital budget of around £3 million.

What is the Council trying to achieve?

- 19 The Council has developed clear priorities which support its overall vision.
- 20 A more focused vision for the District: *To make Rochford the place of choice in the County to live, work and visit* has been recently established. This is underpinned by six priorities:
 - provide quality, cost effective services;
 - work towards a safer and more caring community;
 - provide a green and sustainable environment;
 - encourage a thriving local economy;
 - improve the quality of life for people in our District; and
 - maintain and enhance our local heritage.
- 21 Priorities are clearly underpinned by a series of specific medium and long term actions. These are detailed in the 'Our Performance Plan 2005' document and have been communicated to staff, councillors and the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP).
- 22 Staff and councillors are clear about priorities and underlying key actions. The priorities and vision were derived through consultation with key stakeholders and prioritised in councillor away days, held twice yearly, introduced three years ago.
- 23 The Council is demonstrating clear community leadership. It chairs the LSP and playing an important role in the Thames Gateway initiative, with the Leader of the Council leading the environment group. The Council is involved in development of the Local Area Agreement with the County Council and other districts.
- 24 Leadership by councillors and officers is developing and there is clarity of the respective roles. There is a close working relationship between officers and councillors, with staff feeling that direction is clear and Councillors are supportive.
- 25 The Council is developing an improved approach to user focus and access to services. This has included a new contact centre, accessible buildings and an improved web site adjudged as 'Content Plus'. The Council's values include; '*be responsive to customer needs and requests*' and '*work with others to improve what we do both directly and through partnership working*'. Key plans however do not reflect the Council's commitment to user focus.
- 26 Priorities are not consistently supported by robust plans and challenging targets. The Council has not developed a consistent framework of action plans supporting the delivery of individual priorities. Without robust plans in place, the Council cannot ensure delivery of its priorities.
- 27 The Council does not have a Corporate Plan however many of the key elements are included in other documents such as '*Our Performance Plan*'. A new corporate plan is to be delivered in early 2006 which is being informed through consultation with stakeholders, including a citizens' panel set up jointly with a neighbouring authority.

How has the Council set about delivering its priorities?

- 28** The Council has improved capacity to deliver its priorities. Although progress has been made in a number of areas, performance management is not fully effective.
- 29** The Council has created capacity through effective partnerships with contractors and partners to deliver many of its services. This includes:
- the provision of services, such as the maintenance of parks and open spaces, refuse collection, street cleaning, IT services and leisure;
 - works contracts for all repairs and maintenance; and
 - specialist services such as bailiffs, rodent control, food inspections and consultants who deliver skills not readily available to a small district council.
- 30** The budget process is now more closely linked to priorities and identifies schemes regarded as non priorities. It is set in the context of a rolling five year budget, consultation and the priorities of the Council. In accordance with a number of the Council's priorities, the Council invested £70,000 in environmental projects. Additional resources of £25,000 were directed to Housing Benefits administration. The Council agreed a package of measures to retain staff, improve skills and create efficiencies in service delivery. The result has been to stabilise staff turnover, increase skills levels and remove the backlog of benefit claims.
- 31** Political capacity is improving. Responsibilities are clearly assigned and actively owned by councillors. The leader has undertaken the IDeA leadership programme and the new deputy leader is leading on the review of the structures of the Council. The Council has appointed member champions who lead on a number of issues such as environment, e-government and benefits. A comprehensive training programme has been developed with both internal and external input, some of which is being delivered jointly with other authorities.
- 32** Scrutiny is not fully effective. The Council has identified the need to reorganise the existing political structure, including the role of scrutiny. There are, at present, three scrutiny committees looking at policy and review issues. There has been confusion as to the role of the respective scrutiny committees and it is now proposed to have one scrutiny committee (the Review Committee) and five policy committees responsible for respective service and priority areas. All Councillors are on the Council's Planning Committee. This does not reflect current best practice. Whilst acknowledged by many councillors and officers, it has yet to be addressed.
- 33** The Council is improving capacity to deliver its priorities. It has a stable management team and succession planning is underway. Staff capacity and resourcing has improved since the last CPA. Training is effective and work related, and some vacancies have been filled by identifying staff to be trained up to do jobs, rather than through external recruitment. A new sickness monitoring procedure has been introduced.

The average number of days' sickness has been reduced from 10.4 days per employee in 2002/03 to 9.44 days in 2004/05 (unaudited figures). The Council was awarded Investor in People status in February 2005.

- 34 Performance management has improved since the CPA inspection. This has included quarterly monitoring reports, tracking committee decisions and reporting to Councillors some of the plans for priority actions. Major projects are closely monitored and reported with Prince 2 methodology used for larger projects. All staff receive annual reviews and appraisals which have targets that link to managers' targets and to corporate priorities.
- 35 A proactive approach is taken to secure efficiencies through procurement. The Council has an on line procurement system, is a member of the Procurement Agency for Essex and belongs to the Kent County Council energy purchasing consortium. Recently the collection of non-domestic rates has been transferred to Chelmsford Borough Council.
- 36 However, despite these improvements performance management is not fully effective. Information reported to Councillors lacks clarity, resulting in uncertainty as to progress against Council priorities. There is a lack of clarity in how corporate priorities are translated into lower level plans and strategies. Not all key priority action plans are SMART and some lack clear challenging targets. For example the corporate priority to achieve an 18 per cent recycling rate is not supported by clear actions and targets to ensure its delivery.
- 37 Some supporting systems are inadequate. The Council's performance management system does not explicitly relate costs to quality of services. Officers are provided with clear financial information however this has to be manually produced as a result of weak financial IT systems. Risk management and contingency planning are also not embedded. The Corporate Risk Group has reconvened and progress is being made towards defining roles and responsibilities.

What has the Council achieved/not achieved to date?

- 38 The Council has been successful in improving previously poorly performing services. It has also made good progress against key priority areas and delivered on some key local projects and initiatives.
- 39 The Council has improved its homelessness service since the last CPA inspection. Homelessness has been identified as a key priority action in the 'Our Performance Plan' document. In 2003/04, 70 per cent of applications were determined within 33 working days, between April and September 2005 unaudited figures show that 100 per cent were determined. Improvements have also been achieved in reducing the use of bed and breakfast accommodation. In 2003/04 bed and breakfast usage was reported as 16.4 weeks but between April and September 2005 unaudited figures show that it has reduced to nine weeks.
- 40 The Council has made progress in dealing with applications for benefits. In 2003/04 it took 39.6 days to process a new claim, however between April and September 2005 unaudited figures show that this has fallen to 23.99 days. This has already exceeded the Council's priority target. In addition, the accuracy has improved from 97.4 per cent in 2003/04 to 98.4 per cent in 2005.
- 41 The Council has achieved against its priority for the environment. The rate of recycling has increased from 10 per cent in 2003/04 when it was in the worst performing 25 per cent of councils, to an estimated recycling rate of approximately 18 per cent in 2005/06. This has been achieved by the introduction of a range of recycling schemes and the extension of the households covered by a kerbside and green waste collection. Kerbside waste collection was provided to 19 per cent of households in 2003/04. This has risen to 83.4 per cent in 2004/05, with coverage being extended still further.
- 42 The Council has delivered against a range of key projects despite limited capacity. The renovation of the Rayleigh Windmill has been achieved through successfully securing money from TGSE. The Clements Hall leisure centre has had a range of improvements completed in partnership with the leisure operator, resulting in increased usage. Usage of Great Wakering leisure facility has also increased by 42 per cent from the previous year. Work on the new leisure centre at Rayleigh is now well underway. This has been a priority for the Council and local people for a number of years.
- 43 The Council has made significant improvements to the accessibility of services. This has included a new accessible and DDA compliant contact centre in Rochford and a range of accessibility enhancements to the Civic Suite at Rayleigh. In addition the Council has improved the information provided on its website including the provision of key forms.

14 Progress Assessment Report | What is the Council trying to achieve?

- 44 Best value performance indicators (BVPIs) show that performance has generally improved. Between 2002/03 and 2004/05 51 per cent service of performance indicators have improved. In 2004/05, 50 per cent of indicators were above the median when compared to all other districts.
- 45 The Council achieves a good performance regarding satisfaction indicators. In 2003/04 14 of the 23 indicators were in top quartile, with only two being in bottom quartile. This is set against the Council being the second lowest spend per head of population in Essex.
- 46 The Council is not delivering on its target for the number of affordable housing units required. In 2004/05, 21 units were completed by social housing providers, which was far short of the identified need. However there is little development land and limited brownfield sites in Rochford. The Council has recognised this need and is working with neighbouring authorities to alleviate some of the gap.

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

- 47 The Council shows good progress in learning and planning for the future. However, some plans are yet to be developed and integrated with Council priorities.
- 48 The Council is developing as a learning organisation. A staff newsletter, staff sounding board and staff surveys are now in place. Feedback from staff has informed the performance and development review process. Mechanisms for learning across the organisation are developing and the Council is now actively seeking good practice from external organisations. This has included using IDeA to increase political capacity and other authorities, for housing options appraisal.
- 49 A clear vision and set of priorities for the future have been developed. The Council is now working on translating these into a Corporate Plan, which is due to be published in April 2006. The Community Strategy is also under review and is scheduled for completion in April 2006. However, a co-ordinated time scale is not in place for the delivery of the two plans. This poses challenges to ensure that the plans are compatible and supporting strategies and plans contribute to priorities.
- 50 Robust plans to ensure delivery of the priorities are not in place. The Council has identified its priorities and underpinned these with key actions, some of which have service action plans. However, the approach and level of plans is not consistent and progress against priorities cannot be effectively monitored.
- 51 There is a lack of corporate capacity to bring together departmental performance information, consultation information and local contextual knowledge to support the delivery of priorities across the Council. This lack of capacity limits the effectiveness of the performance management systems being developed.
- 52 Good progress is being made to deliver some of the key priority actions. This includes an effective approach to housing. The Council has achieved 'Fitness for Purpose' for its housing strategy/business plan, which centres on meeting local housing needs, decent homes and improving housing services for the most vulnerable people. A housing options appraisal has been undertaken and Government Office has agreed to the Council seeking stock transfer under LSVT.
- 53 Projects aimed at improving the local environment are being developed. This includes partnerships with community, school and church groups to tackle litter and graffiti. The Council is building local capacity to address community needs.
- 54 A number of key strategies are being developed to support the delivery of priorities. For example the communications strategy is to be revised and the approach to race equalities is being reviewed following a self assessment of performance against the Commission for Racial Equalities standard.

16 Progress Assessment Report | In the light of what the Council has learned to date, what does it plan to do next?

- 55** The Council increased its financial capacity to deliver its future plans. External funding has been successfully secured for a range of priorities including DEFRA funding for recycling and TGSE funds for town centre improvements in Rayleigh.

Appendix 1 – Summary of theme scores and strengths/weaknesses as reported in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment in 2004

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Ambition	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New vision emerging • Community leadership through LSP and TGSE • Strong internal leadership • Commitment to partnership working 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall lack of ambition • Corporate objectives not outcome focused • Ambition limited by funding issue • Plans insufficiently based on demographics and other data • Community strategy under-developed
Prioritisation	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-ordinated consultation programme at service level • Council shifts some resources to priorities • Communication of priorities via the council newspaper 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plethora of 'key priorities' with three implicit top priority projects • Basis for priorities insufficiently informed through identified need or meaningful dialogue • Stakeholders and councillors unclear about priorities • National and local priorities not balanced

18 Progress Assessment Report | Appendix 1 – Summary of theme scores and strengths/weaknesses as reported in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment in 2004

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Focus	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tenacious on issues it sees as important • Sustained focus on some key services and developments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus is not based on an understanding of local need • Focus is inconsistent with stated priorities • Some areas have experienced significant slippage • Reaction to external funding diverts attention • Mechanisms to maintain focus often not effective
Capacity	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large proportion of externalised services • Contracts have delivered funding for new posts and investment • Partnerships building capacity • Ambitious training and development programme • Robust corporate governance systems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited financial capacity • Efficiency savings not identified • Inconsistent approach to charging • Staff capacity limited by recruitment, retention and sickness levels • Political arrangements not efficient • Traditional structures
Performance management	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance framework in place • Corporate complaints being used to identify improvements • Corporate planning processes enable staff to be clear about roles and responsibilities • Sound financial systems and control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance measurement undeveloped in some areas • Performance management inconsistent across services • Unable to assess cost effectiveness of services • Risk management embryonic

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Achievement in quality of service	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall performance above average (PIs) • Good satisfaction levels • Achieved 2003/04 recycling rate a year early • Community safety initiatives • Good parks/open spaces and leisure programmes • Support for local business • Good quality council housing and responsive repairs • Town centre enhancements • Delegation in planning and speed of decisions • Good collection rates • Tackling benefits fraud 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Few measurable outcomes for community safety and economic development • Waste service underperforming and limited kerbside collection • Littering on marginal/private land • Poor enforcement action on environmental issues • Few affordable homes completed • Homeless spend long periods in bed & breakfast accommodation • Disabled access limited • Poor speed in processing benefits • Backlog of planning enforcement cases • Website not customer friendly

20 Progress Assessment Report | Appendix 1 – Summary of theme scores and strengths/weaknesses as reported in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment in 2004

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Achievement of improvement	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued improvements to sheltered housing, community transport recreation and arts facilities • Increased participation in leisure programmes • Improvements in speed of planning decisions • Improved quality of council homes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rate of improvement incremental and many targets missed, sustainability of improvements at risk • No demonstrated positive impact from crime reduction initiatives • Weak progress with waste and recycling • Deteriorating benefits service in 2003/04 • Slow progress to improve derelict sites
Investment	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Track record of securing external funding • Significant community planning gains in the pipeline • Investment in some service improvements • Proactive investment in partnerships to build capacity internally and in communities • Good training and development programmes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of willingness to invest own resources in stated priorities • Gaps in investing in areas of corporate capacity eg private sector housing, culture, HR and procurement • Limited external challenge

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Learning	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning tools include benchmarking best value and service reviews • Pilots used before full implementation • Learnt from peer review 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning not systematically captured or shared • Limited self awareness – view of funding issue limits willingness to tackle issues • Communication and consultation strategies do not support learning • No public speaking at planning committee
Future Plans	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearer vision emerging with the community strategy • Asset management plan and capital strategy satisfactory • Stock options appraisal process agreed • Improved stakeholder involvement in strategy development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not clear how community strategy will be measured/monitored • Implications of TGSE strategy underdeveloped • Slow to re-assess plans in line with changing priorities eg local plan • Risk of not meeting decent homes • Some plans under-developed • Capacity for change limited

Scoring key:

1 - Weak

2 - Weaknesses outweigh strengths

3 - Strengths outweigh weaknesses

4 - Strong

Appendix 2 – Progress monitoring against the findings of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment

- 1 The original comprehensive performance assessment was carried out under the Local Government Act 1999 and published in 2004.
- 2 Under section 3 of the Local Government Act 1999 ('the Act'), best value authorities have a duty to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the exercise of their functions, having regard to the principles of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. By virtue of sections 10 and 13 of the Act the Audit Commission may carry out inspection activity to ensure that a best value authority is complying with this duty, and may issue a report as to its findings. This progress monitoring activity and reporting to assess improvement falls within sections 3, 10 and 13.
- 3 The main elements of this progress monitoring report were collation and analysis of evidence from:
 - self-assessments of progress made, completed by the council;
 - appointed auditor evidence from performance and financial audit activity;
 - audited performance indicators, inspection reports and plan assessments;
 - reviews of key corporate documents including performance reports, committee papers and management reports; and
 - observations, interviews and focus groups with managers, members and staff.
- 4 This progress monitoring report for Rochford District Council was collated by the Audit Commission and reflects evidence gathered over the period from February 2004 to November 2005.
- 5 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 reporting progress to any Monitoring Board and updating and improving any Improvement/Recovery Plan as appropriate.