

Corporate Assessment

December 2007



Corporate Assessment

Sunderland City Council

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Introduction

- 1 Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) is the means by which the Audit Commission fulfils its statutory duty under section 99 of the Local Government Act 2003 to make an assessment, and report on the performance, of local authorities. Corporate assessment is one element in the overall assessment that leads to a CPA score and category.
- 2 The purpose of the corporate assessment is to assess how well the Council engages with and leads its communities, delivers community priorities in partnership with others, and ensures continuous improvement across the range of Council activities. It seeks to answer three headline questions which are underpinned by five specific themes.
 - What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?
 - Ambition
 - Prioritisation
 - What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?
 - Capacity.
 - Performance management.
 - What has been achieved?
 - Achievement
 - Considered against the shared priorities of:
 - sustainable communities and transport;
 - safer and stronger communities;
 - healthier communities;
 - older people; and
 - children and young people.
- 3 Corporate assessments are normally aligned with a joint area review of services for children and young people (JAR). In practice, this means that the Council's achievements in relation to children and young people are assessed using the evidence provided from the JAR. In addition, examples of outcomes and activity, which are relevant to the other themes and which are identified through the JAR, are considered within the corporate assessment.

- 4 The JAR covers all services for children and young people that are directly managed or commissioned by the Council, as well as health and youth justice services provided by other bodies. It focuses on the contributions made by services to improving outcomes. The separate JAR report covers the leadership and management of services for children and young people and, in particular, the way that such services work together to improve outcomes. The description and judgement in respect of children and young people in this report is summarised from the JAR report.

Executive summary

- 5 Sunderland City Council is performing well. The city has high levels of deprivation and significant issues relating to health, employment and education which set a very challenging context for the Council. The Council is determined to address these challenges. It has tapped into an underlying sense of pride in its community and is raising the image of the City and the aspirations of its people.
- 6 With its partners, the Council has created an aspirational vision for Sunderland that has not only been shared and understood by partners, staff and the public but has also generated a passion and enthusiasm for making it a reality. The vision set out in the Community Strategy is to make Sunderland a prosperous city - a desirable, safe and healthy place to live, work, learn and visit, where all people can reach their full potential. Underpinning this are the strategic priorities based on a very good understanding of the area's culture, history and needs. However, the vision and the supporting strategic priorities are not defined beyond the short to medium-term, and therefore provide no detail of the ambitions in the longer-term.
- 7 The Council's high-level strategic priorities are taken from the Sunderland Strategy and accurately reflect the needs and aspirations of the residents of Sunderland. There are good linkages between the strategic priorities, the corporate planning framework, the annual budget planning process and the medium-term financial strategy to ensure that resources follow priorities. However, there are weak links to the priorities in some of the Council's strategies.
- 8 The Council provides very good community leadership. It has led in creating a strong image for Sunderland and in raising the city's profile in the region and internationally. It is highly regarded by its partners. A mature Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) is making good progress on delivery against the action plans which reflect both national and local priorities, sharing resources to do so. Strong partnership working is enabling the Council and its partners to pursue their ambitions.
- 9 Good consultation and needs analysis underpin the ambition and priorities. The Council engages well with local communities and understands the needs of most minority groups. Plans reflect the needs of most communities in Sunderland and established minority groups are engaged to help the Council and its partners develop action plans and targets. The Council is less effective, however, at engaging with some of the more marginal and vulnerable groups within its communities. Diversity is not fully reflected in all aspects of policy development, service design, workforce planning or performance management. Addressing these gaps is important if the Council is to meet the specific needs of its growing and increasingly diverse population.

- 10 The Council has the capacity to deliver its priorities. It is in a strong financial position and delivers good value for money as a result of very sound financial management. Relationships between officers and councillors are good and the Council continues to improve its structures and culture to become 'one council'. Although high sickness levels affect capacity, there is very good commitment by staff to delivering the vision and improvements. The Council uses staff development, communication, risk management and procurement well. However, scrutiny is not providing sufficient challenge to the executive and to the performance of the Council's services.
- 11 The Council has good performance management arrangements and has built on these in recent years. It has good systems to monitor the performance of the Council and the LSP. However, the Council has been slow to tackle underperformance in some areas and there are inconsistencies in target setting in respect of BVPIs. The Council proactively learns from others and adapts the lessons to suit the context of Sunderland.
- 12 The Council is making good progress in improving the quality of life in Sunderland. It has had considerable success in creating jobs and is working hard with partners to raise aspirations for employment with several good initiatives. Economic regeneration is progressing well with significant redevelopment of parts of the city. Very good progress has been made in meeting housing decency standards and the housing needs of most vulnerable groups are being met through a range of existing and planned initiatives. Cleanliness and recycling services are improving and the Council is embedding its commitment to sustainability issues.
- 13 Strong partnership working has resulted in a significant reduction in crime, making Sunderland a safer city although fear of crime has not significantly reduced. The Council has also been successful at working with young people and reducing incidents of anti-social behaviour. Accidental deaths and injuries have reduced as a result of a good multi-agency approach. Drug issues are being proactively addressed and imaginative approaches are helping drugs users to quit. The Council is building on its understanding of community cohesion; it has some good initiatives and responds well when particular tensions arise. These efforts are hampered by the lack of a sound strategy which would enable partners to be more preventative in their approach.
- 14 The Council works well in partnership to improve the health of people living in Sunderland and there are indications of good progress on smoking cessation, take-up of physical activity and healthy eating. The impact on health improvement is internationally recognised and the wellness strategy with the joint centres is excellent. The work with children to promote a healthier lifestyle has made good progress from a low base.

- 15 In developing its strategy for older people, the Council has performed well with good consultation and a proposed approach going beyond the provision of social care to deliver the 'seven dimensions of independence'. The Council has strong champions for older people to ensure that their issues are considered in the work of the LSP and the Council. Primary care, acute and Council provided adult services are all top-rated by Healthcare Commission and CSCI. The Council's services currently go beyond social care to the provision of tailored services including education, home safety, wellness and handy-persons.
- 16 Outcomes for children and young people are good overall. Clear and challenging ambitions for the area are set out in the Children and Young People's Plan which is based on detailed needs analysis and detailed consultation, but target setting is only adequate. The needs of black and ethnic minority children are adequately reflected in strategic objectives but their access to and delivery of some frontline services are not sufficiently tailored to their needs. The impact of services in keeping children safe is adequate, but black and ethnic minority children do not feel safe in some areas of the city. The Council and its partners are having a positive impact on improving both the health and the educational attainment of children and young people. The Youth Offending Service is performing well.

Areas for improvement

- 17 The vision for Sunderland is both challenging and aspirational. Its impact as a driver for change has been inhibited by a lack of clear definition about what it will mean for local people and for the city over the long-term. The Council and its partners have recognised the need to define their ambitions more closely in order to focus on the rate and extent of change required. In developing the new Community Strategy, the Council should provide itself and partners with concrete, long-term targets and milestones in each key area of their ambition for the community. This will enable partners to test the realism of their plans and align resources to deliver the shared ambitions. It will also give local people and other stakeholders a clear idea of the change they can expect to see and build confidence in the brand as measurable change occurs over time.
- 18 The Council needs to ensure that work to define longer-term ambitions and targets also informs the Council's wider strategic framework, to enable all of its strategies and plans to link coherently to the vision and priorities for the city.
- 19 In defining its overall ambitions for the area the Council needs to improve the role of scrutiny as an effective and consistent challenge mechanism, both to the Council and partners. It should do this by adopting a strategic approach, designing scrutiny work programmes to include regular and systematic review of delivery against community ambitions and the underlying priorities.
- 20 Whilst the Council engages well with local communities there are gaps in its approach. It needs to establish more effective engagement with each of the marginal and vulnerable groups within its communities and to ensure that diversity is fully reflected in all aspects of policy development, service design, workforce planning and performance management. To do this will mean having good intelligence and effective mechanisms, and using information appropriately to influence priorities and shape services. This is essential if the Council is to meet the specific needs and aspirations of its growing and increasingly diverse population.
- 21 In taking forward its commitment to environmental sustainability coupled with the importance of the promotion of Sunderland as an attractive place to live and work, the Council is embedding environmental sustainability across its services. The Council should continue these efforts and should further improve further its performance in recycling and cleanliness. It should continue to work with others, including local organisations and businesses, on sustainability issues.

Summary of assessment scores

Headline questions	Theme	Score*
What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?	Ambition	3
	Prioritisation	3
What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?	Capacity	3
	Performance management	3
What has been achieved?	Achievement	3
Overall corporate assessment score**		3
*Key to scores		
1 – below minimum requirements – inadequate performance		
2 – at only minimum requirements – adequate performance		
3 – consistently above minimum requirements – performing well		
4 – well above minimum requirements – performing strongly		

**Rules for determining the overall corporate assessment score

Scores on 5 themes	Overall corporate assessment score
Two or more themes with a score of 4 None less than score of 3	4
Three or more themes with a score of 3 or more None less than score of 2	3
Three or more themes with a score of 2 or more	2
Any other combination	1

Context

The locality

- 22 Sunderland lies on the coast in the North East of England, at the mouth of the river Wear. The city covers an area of 13,700 hectares including some attractive coastline. The city of Sunderland is the largest in the North East region. It includes the former new town of Washington and two towns in the former coal-mining areas of Hetton and Houghton.
- 23 The population is 283,700 and, after a number of years of decline, is beginning to grow. The 2001 census found that 1.9 per cent of the population were from ethnic minority communities, significantly below the national average. However, migration from overseas and an increasingly diverse student population mean that this proportion is increasing. The number of older people in the city is also increasing.
- 24 The local economy was originally built around heavy industry, mainly coal mining, ship building and glassmaking. Between the 1980s and 1990s, the first two of these industries disappeared and the third has greatly diminished since. The major employers now are automotive, call centres and public sector organisations. Inward investment at Doxford International Business Park has created over 8,000 jobs. More recently there has been a commitment of £100 million further investment into Rainton Bridge South Business Park. Other investments include the National Glass Centre, Stadium Park and the new Aquatic Centre which is under construction.
- 25 There are significant areas of deprivation within the city and in 2004 just over 46 per cent of the population lived in areas ranked among the 20 per cent most deprived in England. The average health of local people is much worse than the national average, with life expectancy significantly below the UK average. 10 per cent of the population is permanently sick or disabled and 18,000 people claim incapacity benefit. Educational attainment is below the national average, although significant improvement has been made since 2000. The quality of housing is generally good, with 97 per cent of social housing meeting the Government's Decent Homes Standard. The crime rate in Sunderland is below the national average, but fear of crime is high.
- 26 Transport links are good, both by public transport and by road, with good connections to the major north-south A1 and A19 trunk roads, a frequent Metro train service to Newcastle, and two nearby airports.

The Council

- 27 The Council has been Labour-controlled for many years; at the time of this inspection there were 57 Labour, 13 Conservative, four independent and one Liberal Democrat councillors. Since 2002, the Council has operated under a Leader and Cabinet model. The Cabinet consists of the Leader, Deputy Leader and eight portfolio-holders, for resources, children's services, adult services, planning and transportation, housing and public health, neighbourhood and street services, regeneration and community cohesion, and culture and leisure.
- 28 Six Review Committees undertake the scrutiny role. These are Policy and Co-ordination, Children's Services, Health and Wellbeing, Environment and Planning, Regeneration and Community, and Culture and Leisure. The Council also has six Area Committees, one for each of the regeneration areas. These committees are made up of the relevant ward councillors, have delegated budgets and deal with issues of local concern. There are three regulatory committees (for Standards, Licensing and Planning), a Corporate Parenting Board and an Audit and Governance Committee.
- 29 The Council has 14,400 employees in five directorates: Corporate Services, Adult Services, Children's Services, Community and Cultural Services, and Development and Regeneration. The management function is set up as two teams comprising the Corporate Management Team (CMT) which focuses on performance, value for money and governance issues and the Executive Management Team (EMT) which leads on the strategic management and direction of the Council. Both meet weekly to discuss the strategic business of the Council. The Council transferred its housing stock to a Registered Social Landlord, GenToo, in 2001.
- 30 The Council's net revenue budget for 2006/07 is £225 million and it has a capital programme of £97 million. The Council has the lowest council tax in the Tyne and Wear area and second lowest in the North East region. It receives both national (New Deal for Communities) and European funding related to the levels of deprivation in the city.
- 31 The Council is a key member of the Local Strategic Partnership, the Sunderland Partnership. The Partnership was established in 1994 and has issued two versions of its Community Strategy, in 2001 and in 2004, each covering three years. Sunderland has a Local Area Agreement with Central Government, signed in January 2006.

What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?

Ambition

- 32 The Council is performing well in this area. A high-level aspirational vision is supported by priorities which focus on improving the quality of life for Sunderland residents. The ambitions are challenging in the context of the issues facing local communities. The Council and its partners are pursuing these ambitions through strong partnership working and by raising the profile of the city through the Image and International Strategies. Thorough consultation is enabling the Council to have a good understanding of most local communities to inform its ambitions. However, the vision and the supporting strategic priorities are not defined beyond the short to medium-term, and therefore provide no detail of the ambitions in the longer-term.
- 33 The overall ambition for Sunderland is set out at a high level as an aspirational vision. Since 2001, the Sunderland Partnership has expressed its vision for the city in its Community Strategy: 'Sunderland will be a prosperous city. A desirable, safe and healthy place to live, work, learn and visit, where all people can reach their full potential'. The ambition is supported by eight strategic priorities: creating economic prosperity; extending cultural opportunities; improving the quality, choice and range of housing; improving health and social care; reducing crime and the fear of crime; raising standards and improving access and participation in learning; developing an attractive and accessible city; and creating inclusive communities. The priorities focus on the issues which need to be addressed to achieve the overall ambition. The wide range of these ambitions and priorities means that they are challenging particularly given the scale of deprivation in Sunderland and the legacy of its industrial past.
- 34 Partners have a very good shared understanding of the aspirational nature of the high-level vision and of actions which are needed under the priorities. To tackle what it saw as Sunderland's negative post-industrial image, the LSP has adopted an Image Strategy, launched in 2005. In effect, the Image Strategy further develops the economic prosperity element of the overall ambition, highlighting some of the city's key strengths as part of a campaign which has dual aims: to attract people to live and invest in the city, and to raise local people's aspirations. The Brand which forms the core of the Image Strategy was developed on the basis of widespread consultation and is supported by 120 partners. Its success is evidenced by the city having the highest rate of inward investment in the Tyne and Wear region and by recent increases in population.

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- 35 However, partners' ability to deliver the ambitions is limited by the relatively short-term nature of the detail which underpins them. The Partnership has issued Community Strategies in 2001 and in 2004. In both versions of the Strategy there is currently no longer-term detail to define the vision. Most targets for the achievement of the priorities are for only three years, with a few which derive from national strategies (for example, for health) stretching to the medium-term (2010). The absence of longer-term targets and milestones means that it is difficult for the partners to assess what they need to do or to assess the extent to which change needs to be made beyond short-term plans or to measure their rate of progress towards the overall goal.
- 36 There is a more robust approach emerging in the development of the next Community Strategy. The Council is taking a leading role in this and is discussing with partners a longer-term and more challenging approach for the new Strategy with the intention of defining the ambition for the longer-term. Widespread consultation with local people and other stakeholders to identify key priorities is being used to further develop the ambition. Alongside this, the Image Strategy is providing the Partnership with the means to focus its efforts in a way which is closely linked to the views and preferences of local communities.
- 37 Ambitions are soundly based on information on local communities, including the views of local people. The Council has a good protocol for sharing information with its partners and there are effective systems for collecting and using data. The Council uses these arrangements to good effect in some specific initiatives which link to the overall ambitions. For example, it has shared its knowledge and intelligence of the city to develop, with partners, programmes to inform the development of the 'Wellness' strategy and of the 'Building Schools for the Future' programme, linking to the strategic priorities for improving health and improving educational standards. With its partners, the Council engages in wide and effective consultation and it has a good understanding of the culture and history of Sunderland. Arrangements for seeking the views of the community include regular detailed surveys, a citizens' panel, annual 'state of the city' debates and independently commissioned research. Community representation on LSP thematic groups ensures the involvement of local people in determining priorities and action plans.
- 38 The Council's community leadership has generated a real passion for and commitment to the delivery of the vision and priorities within the Partnership. While partners in all sectors and the Council's own staff see it as providing high quality community leadership, the Council leads by consensus rather than dominating the Partnership. The Council's leadership has helped to ensure that the partners work as one to achieve the ambitions of Sunderland.

- 39 The need to look outwards to support its ambitions for a prosperous city has been clearly recognised by the Council. It is the lead authority for the Tyne and Wear City Region and plays a leading role in regional European networks. It has recently developed an International Strategy with its partners; it is engaging with a city in the fast growing new economy of China; and it has entered into a Friendship Agreement with Washington DC, capitalising on the historical Washington family link with the city. These initiatives build on a tradition of European engagement through co-operation with its twin towns and participation in EU transnational projects to develop and exchange good practice. Together, the Community Strategy, the Image Strategy and the International Strategy are providing the Council and its partners with a framework to pursue ambitions for a more prosperous future for Sunderland.

Prioritisation

- 40 The Council is performing well in this area. Its high-level strategic priorities are taken from the Sunderland Strategy and reflect the needs and aspirations of most residents of Sunderland. There are good linkages between the strategic priorities, the annual budget planning process and the medium-term financial strategy to ensure that resources follow priorities. There is a good corporate planning framework but the links to the priorities in some of the Council's strategies are weak. The Council's engagement with voluntary sector partners and the minority groups they represent, in order to understand their priorities, is not consistent across all groups.
- 41 The Council's overall corporate planning framework links well with the strategic priorities for the area. Strategic priorities and LAA targets are pulled together in the Corporate Improvement Plan (CIP), a comprehensive three-year plan which is updated annually. It contains detailed action plans for the Council's services for the delivery of the strategic priorities which include linkages to the priorities which are relevant to the service. The CIP also sets out how the strategic priorities link with the regional, European and international context and take account of the Regional Economic Strategy and Regional Spatial Strategy. Most of the Council's plans and strategies, including the Housing Strategy, the Cultural Strategy and the Local Transport Plan, are also consistent with the Community Strategy's priorities and targets.
- 42 However, some of the Council's strategies are insufficiently robust to deliver its ambitions. For example, the Economic Development Strategy is inadequate for the achievement of the aim of making Sunderland a prosperous city, and the Council's spatial planning framework is not up-to-date. While the CIP overall enables councillors, managers and staff to understand the priorities and how plans and strategies are designed to deliver them, some weaknesses in associated plans and strategies mean that the framework for the delivery of the strategic priorities is not fully robust.

- 43 The partners' strategic priorities are based on a good understanding of the needs of the area, derived from consultation and research, but this is not fully comprehensive. The Council's consultation strategy includes a framework for consulting 'hard to reach' groups, there has been consultation with black and ethnic minority businesses and there is effective consultation with young people through a youth parliament. However, the Council's engagement with voluntary sector partners and the minority groups they represent is not consistent across all groups. There is good engagement with larger, established, funded organisations whereas smaller interest groups are less visible and have had poorer experiences of effective or consistent engagement with the Council. The Council cannot therefore be sure that it is adequately reflecting the needs and aspirations of all minority interests in its priorities or service delivery.
- 44 The delivery of the strategic priorities is supported well by the Council's own Corporate Improvement Objectives (CIOs). The CIOs are for delivering customer focused services; people development and being 'one council'; efficient and effective council; and improving partnership working to deliver 'one city'. The CIP includes detailed objectives and targets for the CIOs. The CIOs are helping the Council to achieve its ambitions and deliver better services to the community.
- 45 The Council's budget planning is robustly linked to the strategic priorities. Its framework for delivering the strategic priorities is underpinned by a strong Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and budget planning process. It has a very thorough approach to planning its budget, linking the priorities, the related action plans, the CIOs, responses to consultation on the budget and other issues, research data and external funding to determine the allocation of resources and priorities for additional investment. Examples of resources following priorities include the allocation of resources to street cleaning and economic regeneration; additional resources have been allocated to procurement, recycling and planning through the delivery of significant efficiency savings. This comprehensive approach ensures that resources are focused on the delivery of the strategic priorities.
- 46 The Council and its partners work together effectively to align resources to priorities. This includes contributions of money, people, expertise and other resources, for example, in the establishment of the Wellness Centres and work in relation to anti-social behaviour initiatives. The Council's Adult Services Department has a dedicated Partnership section to support partnership working. There are shared and pooled budgets for example for learning disabilities, and co-location of staff and some joint funding of posts, such as the new joint Director of Public Health and the multi-agency Neighbourhood Policing Teams. The partners' understanding of local needs informs the annual action plans for the delivery of the priorities: for example, data sharing for demand forecasting informs planning and commissioning between the Council and the PCT for those with long-term conditions. These arrangements mean that partnership working is able to contribute effectively to the achievement of the priorities.

- 47 Staff and partners contribute to the action plans that underpin the priorities in the Sunderland Strategy and the CIP. All the LSP partners work together in the thematic groups to determine the action plans to deliver the priorities. Council staff are encouraged to develop action plans within their teams and service areas to ensure delivery of the priorities. For example, staff actively participated in the design and delivery of the new Children's service, the multi-agency Home Improvement Agency and Council communications.
- 48 The Council has demonstrated its ability to make difficult choices to support the delivery of its priorities. For example, it has closed Council-run care homes and associated day-centres to promote local solutions such as independence at home and the use of private sector homes, and it transferred its housing stock to secure investment for improvement.

What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?

Capacity

- 49 The Council is performing well in this area. It has particular strengths in leadership, governance and partnership working, which has been a key theme of the Council's work for many years, but the scrutiny function is not fully effective. Although high sickness levels affect capacity, sound leadership encourages innovation and empowers staff, leading to high morale. Financial management, risk management and ICT are very good. Significant progress has been made in procurement, and more recently in project and programme management; these areas perform well. Management and decision-making arrangements are effective. The Council's approach to equalities and diversity in Sunderland is underdeveloped.
- 50 Political and managerial leadership is very good. Senior councillors and officers are very well respected and provide excellent role models for staff. Their leadership is visible within the Council and recognised and welcomed by the Council's partners and stakeholders. There are very good working relationships between officers and councillors. Partners see the Council as leading and facilitating partnerships, but not dominating them. It encourages partners to take responsibility and accountability for delivery. The Council's culture encourages innovation and the recent staff survey showed that they are adaptive and welcome change. This is demonstrated by the response to emerging agendas around procurement, communications and information governance. A recent staff survey shows that staff morale is high with 90 per cent seeing the Council as a good place to work. As a result, staff and stakeholders are very clear and motivated about the Council's vision and priorities, and about what they are expected to contribute.
- 51 The Council's management and decision-making arrangements are clear and effective. CMT and EMT meetings are effective and focused on the important issues. There are frequent briefings between Directors and Portfolio Holders and there are monthly Cabinet briefings to discuss policy making and recent developments. These arrangements are working well to ensure that the Council works in an efficient and effective way.

- 52** The scrutiny function is not fully effective. Review Committees contribute to policy development in such areas as corporate parenting, contact centres, road safety, and play areas, There are examples of challenge by scrutiny producing positive impacts, including the review of high staff sickness absence levels that led to a range of initiatives being put in place to improve health and safety, motivation and wellness; levels of sickness absence have fallen as a result. However, scrutiny does not provide consistent focused challenge on performance review and service improvement. The Council has put in place additional training and guidance to support the challenge role of scrutiny. There is a well established personal development programme for councillors which provides for individual feedback and a training and development plan.
- 53** High ethical standards are promoted and maintained. Councillors and officers are clear about their respective roles and responsibilities, and treat each other with respect. Both groups are clear about the Council's Code of Conduct, and have received extensive training in this area. The Council's Standards Committee is proactive and independent. Governance of partnerships is very sound, underpinned by a robust Code of Practice. Partners are clear about their respective roles and responsibilities and understand and respect the differing ways of operating. As a result, the ethical agenda remains at the forefront of the Council's work.
- 54** Partnership working is generally highly effective. Working jointly on the priorities, the partners have increased capacity to deliver outcomes in many areas including economic regeneration, crime reduction, wellness, learning disabilities and mental health. Residents involved in these projects have seen real improvements as a result.
- 55** The Council has strong financial capacity to support delivery of its priorities. It makes excellent uses of its resources to meet key financial targets, reflected in its achievement of the highest score of 4 in the Audit Commission's Use of Resources assessment for 2006. Sustained prudent financial management has given the Council the flexibility to direct its significant resources at its key priorities. The Medium-term Financial Strategy is clear, and sets out in a comprehensive manner how the Council will use its financial resources in future years. Budget monitoring is strong and unintended high spending is addressed effectively.
- 56** The Council provides good value for money and is working hard to improve on this. The Council is not a high cost authority and this is reflected in Council tax levels. There are specific areas of relatively high cost but these relate to priority areas such as regeneration, education and waste. The Council performs well in making efficiencies and delivered over £10 million savings in 2005/06. There are very thorough processes in place to identify and review areas of high spend and to improve and secure value for money.

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- 57** On behalf of itself and its partners, the Council is successful at attracting external funding to support delivery of regeneration priorities. For example in 2005/06 it secured £4 million of New Deal for Communities, £6.8 million of Neighbourhood Renewal, £2.6 million of Single Regeneration Budget, £1.3 million of Urban and £5.9 million of Single Programme funds and £3 million of EU Objective 2 funding. Examples of how this has been targeted include funding Inclusive Communities work, multi-agency neighbourhood policing teams, regeneration projects, and accessibility audits. The external funding has also supported business creation, physical regeneration and tourism development. The allocation of external funds is in line with the Council's priorities and supports the development of areas recognised as in need of improvement.
- 58** Risk management is exceptional, and strongly embedded in the organisation. This has been recognised by numerous awards. There are a comprehensive risk management framework, a well-resourced risk management team, and clear arrangements for reporting and reviewing risks. Councillors are effectively involved in risk management through reports to Cabinet, Audit and Governance, and Review committees. The Council's Partnership Code of Practice sets out a clear approach to risk management in its partnerships. A good example of the effectiveness of these arrangements is the way the Council has managed the resolution of the first phase of the single status negotiations effectively in a risk assessed manner. This has sought to limit its financial exposure to claims and judgements in advance of deadlines and has enabled job enrichment in front-line services enabling the Council to better target its resources. These elements are embedded in how the Council manages its work, and enable it to continue to assess risks and opportunities in a systematic way.
- 59** Procurement is used effectively to support delivery of priorities. A range of processes such as orders have been e-enabled since 2004 and e-tendering has recently been rolled out across the Council. Procurement and core skills are in place across all services and 'super users' trained in procurement are used to provide hands on training to staff to ensure use of the systems is maximised. Good procurement and efficiency gains have helped the Council to achieve value for money and savings of over £1.1 million. The Council demonstrates an innovative approach to procurement. This can be seen in its well developed plans to put in place e-invoicing this year, introduce an e-market place joint venture with nine other councils, a corporate purchasing card scheme, implementation of social services framework contracts, the Tyne and Wear healthcare alliance, and partnering arrangements to regenerate the Port area. The Council's involvement in the North East Centre of Excellence provides benefits in training and collaboration with other councils and agencies. While the plans are being implemented, the existing and new arrangements are securing improved value for money for the people of Sunderland.

- 60 Workforce planning is effective and is developed in collaboration with partners where appropriate. For example, salaries for ICT jobs are set at a level to attract and retain the right number and calibre of staff in a competitive local market. The Children's Trust workforce development strategy covers all partners and effectively addresses skills, recruitment, retention and training. There is a strong human resource strategy, varied and good internal communications and a comprehensive range of staff development and leadership programmes which are regularly reviewed and evaluated and clearly reflect the Council's development needs identified in its corporate plans. Good progress is being made in introducing flexible working practices to help support diversity in the workforce. However, sickness absence levels are high and whilst the Council has made progress reducing it from 12.9 to 11.9 days this is still above the national average and reduces the Council's capacity. As a result of these initiatives staff feel motivated and empowered and recruitment and retention poses no particular problems for the Council.
- 61 The Council's use of ICT effectively supports delivery of the aims and priorities. It performs above the national average against Society of Chief Information Technology Managers (SOCITM) performance standards and effectively supports staff in their work. The use of ICT to improve community access is strong. The Council has almost achieved the national target for electronic transactions and is using ICT with customers and the community to deliver the e-government agenda. A range of initiatives including 'Communities of Interest', electronic village halls and community e-champions are well embedded and the recent investment in new technology and systems for HR, payroll, council tax and housing benefit administration means that the Council is well placed to meet its needs beyond the medium-term and is providing better community access to services. There are clear plans in place to further develop its contact centre and systems integration.
- 62 Project and programme management is effective. A Programme and Project Office (PPO) is now established which co-ordinates and monitors all major projects such as Building Schools for the Future and the single non-emergency number. It has put in place effective programme management and governance arrangements. All major projects are managed using Prince II or the Council's own project management methodology; relevant staff across the Council are now trained in Prince II; and all major projects are now included in a 'project blueprint' which is reported regularly to the Executive Management Team. The PPO provides assurance to the Council on the delivery of major projects to timetable and budget and enables the Council to co-ordinate its work and focus on the projects that are delivering its ambitions.

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63 The Council's approach to equalities and diversity in Sunderland is adequate but not yet fully developed. Full account of diversity is not taken in all policy development and service design nor reflected in the workforce, which is currently only representative with regard to the proportion of women and those of ethnic minority origin in top jobs. The Council is currently at Level 2 of the Equalities Standard for Local Government and has the component parts and a robust action plan to achieve Level 3. Its efforts to date have been focused on putting in place structures and channels of communication, including an integrated Diversity and Inclusion Team, and Independent Advisory Groups (which link to the LSP) covering disability, faith, gender, older people, race, sexuality, and younger people. However, there has not yet been time for these to have had a demonstrable impact.

Performance management

64 The Council is performing well in this area. Councillors and managers use performance management to drive performance in priority areas and deliver better service for customers. Performance management is integrated with financial management and consideration of user satisfaction data. The same framework is used by the Sunderland Partnership, including for managing delivery against the Local Area Agreement, and by the Children's Trust. However, the Council is not always effective in tackling underperformance or setting improvement targets and it lacks consistency in assessing the impact of delivery for some more vulnerable sectors of its community.

65 The Cabinet, EMT and service managers generally manage performance effectively. Performance (including user satisfaction), expenditure to date and associated risks, together with action plans, are regularly reported to Cabinet and Review Committees and performance clinics have been introduced to address under-performance. The arrangements focus on outcomes, assessed on national and local performance measures. Examples of this are the actions taken to improve primary school attendance and attainment at age 14. Effective performance management has helped improve their attendance and narrowed the gap against the national averages of the aggregate Key Stage 3 percentages. In 2003/04 and 2004/05 the Council was slow to address delays in planning decisions, but it has since tackled the issue vigorously and the speed of decisions now meets Government targets.

66 The scrutiny function's role in challenging under-performance is underdeveloped. Whilst there are examples of where it has provided a positive impact, such as the review study of exclusions from school leading to investment in behaviour support and a drop in exclusions from close to the national average to less than 10 per cent of that rate in 2005/06, the challenge to underperformance is generally inconsistent. This means that performance management is missing an element of challenge that effective councillor-led scrutiny could bring.

- 67** The frequency of monitoring performance is adjusted appropriately. The basic frequency for reporting is quarterly, but this is increased to monthly when a significant performance enhancement is being sought. Reports to EMT, Cabinet and Review Committees focus on high risk and priority areas. Adjusting the frequency according to risk, managers and councillors optimise the use of their time. Expenditure control is sound. Budget allocations are reviewed quarterly and virements made where appropriate. Monthly, the expenditure against the budget is examined in detail and variances from plan investigated. This ensures that significant departures from plan do not occur and funding matches priorities.
- 68** The complaints system is easy to access and the Council is both responsive to complaints and uses what has been learnt to make changes to service delivery. By offering a variety of channels, the Council makes it easy to complain. The Council has learnt from individual complaints and made changes to service delivery. Examples are the issue of a general guide for schools seeking advice from the authority, which grew out of a particular failure to obtain advice, and increased enforcement against dog-fouling, which has led to a marked drop in complaints. However, mechanisms for distilling messages from comments are limited. Improved service has resulted from the user feedback.
- 69** Performance management of staff is effective. A high percentage of appraisals are carried out annually, with all office-based staff having personal targets, derived from Service and Team plans and targets. The Council is addressing the small minority of staff that did not receive an appraisal in the last year. Staff are encouraged to be self-aware and look at their own performance. In this way corporate objectives are translated into goals for most employees. However, there is no system for aggregating departmental records and centrally recording the completion of appraisals.
- 70** The Council and its partners have a good range of performance measures with which to judge progress. Performance data is captured from services and partners via a web-based IT system and held in a corporate database, from which a variety of reports can be produced. The LSP receives progress reports against targets every six months and reviews and discusses performance and each thematic group gets detailed reports on progress within its theme. For example, the Safer Sunderland Partnership responded to reports of domestic burglary rising by 40 per cent and took action to target hotspots and harden targets. There are a few gaps and some weaknesses in performance data; for example, despite work in local partnerships, there is limited data to judge progress on health issues such as obesity although the Council is well prepared for new measures required in 2007/08. By having effective systems the Council and its partners can monitor progress across all strategic priorities.

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- 71 The approach to target-setting is good but its implementation is inconsistent. There is sound guidance on choosing targets that are challenging but also realistic. However, a few targets are insufficiently challenging for the priority the Council assigns to the issues. For example, the targets set for the reduction in the numbers of children looked after, which is a priority for the Council, would not achieve the level of similar authorities, even after three years. Additionally in 2005/06, 40 per cent of Best Value PI targets were not achieved. In setting these targets inadequate account had been taken of the definition of measures, historical trends or the availability of resources. The Council has recognised this weakness and provided training to address it. If targets are not soundly based, they will not be effective as a spur to improvement.
- 72 The Council has an inconsistent approach to monitoring services and involving users in assessing the impact of delivery. It has undertaken good surveys of the views and needs of BME communities and businesses. It makes good use of numerous mechanisms for service monitoring and evaluation, for example, in Children's Services, and reports levels of performance in a transparent way. However, the Council has limited means of measuring impact for vulnerable groups or for differentiating between geographically distinct areas. Without such measures, the Council is unable to show that it is addressing the diverse needs of local people.
- 73 The Council makes good use of learning and notable practice from other service providers to adapt that for local use. For example, the learning from visits to other authorities has influenced the procurement specification for major IT systems. Many services participate in benchmarking where comparisons of performance and of processes help identify opportunities for improvement. Building on practice elsewhere, the Council developed an innovative 'night-sitting' service for vulnerable people giving a better and cheaper service. By learning from others, the Council secures better value for money.
- 74 The responsiveness of the Council to suggestions for improvement is mixed. Contractors feel that the Council is excellent at inviting suggestions for improvement and acting on them, and the Council seeks the views of its own staff through regular surveys. In a recent survey, 72 per cent of staff had confidence in the Council's ability to manage change, but 40 per cent of staff also felt that the Council should involve them more in planning and decision-making.
- 75 The Council makes good use of internal and external challenge to improve. It uses a variety of ways to review services, focused on efficiency or improved outcomes. It has recently reviewed planning, equalities, children looked after and consultation processes. External reviews are also used, such as the IDeA peer review of planning and the Audit Commission's survey of schools. By responding positively to constructive criticism, the Council improves services and value for money.

What has been achieved?

- 76** The Council is performing well in this area and together with its partners has a clear understanding of the local issues through which there has been a drive to improve economic prosperity, the health of the community and to raise the aspirations of its residents. Quality of life in Sunderland is generally improving, the city centre has benefited from investment, traffic congestion in the city is low and the quality of social housing is good. The Council has attracted inward investment and new businesses to the city, creating new jobs which are mainly taken by local people. Although skill levels remain very low and worklessness levels in the city are still very high, the Council is successfully working with partners to raise aspirations and support local residents back into employment. The Council's significant investment in schools has led to improved results and strong partnership working has made Sunderland a safer city. Environmental performance is improving through a range of initiatives by the Council, often working in partnership with others. Overall the Council has demonstrated a balanced approach to addressing things that are important locally as well as national priorities.
- 77** The Council is delivering good quality services. In 2005/06, 58 per cent of key performance indicators improved and 42 per cent were in the best quartile nationally. Areas of previously poor performance such as planning and recycling have now improved. Performance is strong in a number of areas such as benefits, housing and culture and adults social care services. Overall satisfaction with the Council has not improved since 2003 but remains relatively high at 51 per cent. Satisfaction with key services has improved slightly.
- 78** The Council puts people at the heart of what it does and this is demonstrated in the approach to removing the obstacles to raising aspirations. Unemployment is at its lowest level for decades at 4.9 per cent and the Council and key partners are investing in getting people back to work. There has been investment in A-level provision and performance has moved the city up the league tables from 128th in 2002 to 7th in 2006. The Council has also tailored its successful 'Digital Challenge' initiative around people and engaging with them with new technology.
- 79** Ambitious targets have been set for health improvement and progress is being made through multi-agency working between the Council and the Teaching Primary Care Trust (TPCT), supported by approaches such as the 'Wellness' strategy. Sunderland is performing significantly better than average in relation to smoking cessation, and teenage conception rates have reduced. However, performance is poor against key health outcome measures such as life expectancy and infant mortality.

Sustainable communities and transport

- 80** The Council has worked effectively to secure business investment following the closure of the traditional industries. Through an ambitious and coherent strategy it has an excellent track record of attracting inward investment and new businesses to the city. Major industries now include automotive, banking and call centres. Although these sectors face pressure, the major businesses that have invested in Sunderland, such as Nissan, have subsequently re-invested. The Council's strategy deliberately encourages diversification in the range of businesses attracted, so that there is not an over-reliance on any one industry. There has been a 19 per cent increase in the number of small and medium-sized enterprises in the city since 2004 through a range of other locally focused initiatives.
- 81** As a result of the efforts of the Council and its partners, unemployment levels have reduced during the last few years. Although skill levels remain very low and worklessness levels in the city are still very high, the Council is successfully working with partners to raise aspirations and support local residents back into employment.. The Northern Way 'worklessness pathfinder' is informing future plans in this area. There are 13 area-based 'Job Linkage' schemes in place which handle 3,000 cases per year and an innovative 'Pupil First' initiative which involves the mentoring of school children to raise their job aspirations. Since 2004, some 3,000 new jobs have been created, with the majority taken by local residents; for example, 85 per cent of the workforce of 8,000 at Doxford International Business Park comes from the local area. The new development at Rainton Bridge South has attracted inward investment of £8 million and will create a further 4,000 jobs.
- 82** Ambitious regeneration schemes have transformed areas of the city and improved the quality of life in targeted communities. Improvements in the physical regeneration of the city are clearly visible such as Stadium park, Park Lane transport interchange and Herrington County Park. Many regeneration projects have involved the successful reclamation of derelict land, a legacy of the industrial past. Partnership working has secured significant external funding such as the Sunnyside Partnership, which has attracted over £40 million and has transformed the local area.
- 83** Very good progress has been made in providing decent homes. As a result of transferring its entire housing stock of 36,000 properties to Sunderland Housing Group (SHG, now renamed as GenToo) in 2001, the Council ensured £600 million of investment. The good condition of the housing stock at the point of transfer supported SHG's work to achieve the Government's decency standard. As a result, only 2.7 per cent of social housing does not meet the decent homes standard.

- 84** The Council is working with others to address housing needs. There is a lack of housing at the top of the market and a surplus at the bottom, with demand for better quality housing being driven up by improving economic prosperity. An understanding of housing need is informing housing renewal plans with 4,000 new homes planned to replace nearly 4,900 properties on major sites identified for development. These plans are at an early stage but developments are coming on stream now to widen the choice of executive housing. Housing clearance has affected the housing market in some communities such as Hendon and East End. In response to need, there are plans and funding in place to provide additional domestic refuge places in 2008 and support a specialist inclusive family facility from December 2007. Provision is made for most vulnerable groups including ex-offenders and asylum seekers, and for those wishing to maintain independent living through the Home Improvement Agency and planned Extra Care programme, but the availability of accommodation for some young people is not adequate. The Council has begun to improve the performance of and customer satisfaction with the homelessness service.
- 85** Environmental performance is improving through a range of initiatives by the Council, often working in partnership with others. Recycling has increased, the area is becoming cleaner and abandoned cars and graffiti are removed more quickly. Local multi-agency problem-solving groups (LMAPS) are supporting the targeted deployment of resources with partners including police and fire. There are good quality parks, with three awarded Green Flag status and improved satisfaction levels. However, the Council's performance is average compared to other councils. In spite of improvements, in 2005/06 the percentage of household waste recycled or composted was among the lowest and the percentage of land and highways with unacceptable levels of litter was average. Local people's satisfaction with the quality of the environment is mixed.
- 86** The Council is developing a strategic approach to local and global sustainability issues, and is embedding this approach in its activities, for example through support to alternatives to car usage, work on eco-footprinting and carbon emissions management. It is applying sustainability assessments to new developments and using the Building Research Establishment's Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM) to ensure high environmental standards are achieved in all new schools. Using BREEAM has resulted in the design of a school with an environmentally friendly 'green roof' incorporating vegetation to minimise heat loss and re-using rain water. The Council's climate change initiative includes baseline information on energy and waste production which was collected in partnership with other agencies. Targeted awareness campaigns and the expansion of the kerbside collection service have increased recycling rates, although the volume of waste collected remains high. The Council is working with neighbouring councils on a waste management strategy and long-term disposal arrangements.

- 87 The Council and its partners have invested in and improved the transport infrastructure to facilitate access to jobs and services. Improvements such as the Park Lane transport interchange have provided a better travel environment and there has been a recent increase in Metro usage. Further road schemes are underway to support key regeneration plans in the city. The Council has received a national award for its cycleway developments and cycling levels have increased by 13 per cent. Partnership working with the Tyne and Wear Passenger Transport Executive (Nexus) and the voluntary sector is addressing the transport needs of some excluded communities, through initiatives being developed under the 'Tackling Social Exclusion through Transport' (TSETT) programme. There is a clear role for community transport and initiatives such as a 'Buddying' scheme for people with learning disabilities and, an Age Concern city-wide shopping service are already in place. The transport infrastructure is facilitating access to services and local jobs.

Safer and stronger communities

- 88 Strong partnership working has reduced crime significantly and made Sunderland a safer city. Efforts in delivering the Safer Sunderland Strategy are focused through the Safer Sunderland Partnership. Neighbourhood policing teams have been established, supported by 62 police community support officers. Specific programmes, such as the Prolific and Priority Offenders scheme, have resulted in a 70 per cent reduction in re-offending since October 2004. Between 2002/03 and 2005/06 total recorded crime fell by 25 per cent, house burglary reduced by 54 per cent, vehicle crime by 34 per cent and robbery by 25 per cent. All crime rates are lower than the national averages.
- 89 The reduction in recorded crime has not been matched by a commensurate improvement in feelings of safety, although there has been some reduction in local people's fear of crime. Despite good intelligence available through a six-monthly survey of 6,000 households to establish concerns, investment in street lighting, initiatives such as taxi rank marshalling and on-street TV used to give out safety messages, fear of crime at night in Sunderland has not reduced. The Council is aware of higher than average levels of fear amongst younger people, and in particular BME residents.
- 90 The Council's work to strengthen community cohesion has not impacted on community perceptions. Independent Advisory Groups have been established to build community capacity and to represent different minority and vulnerable groups. The 'Show Racism the Red Card' initiative has been actively supported. A reorganisation within the Council has focused resources on this issue. The Council and its partners have demonstrated they can respond to incidents in local communities and reduce tensions. However, there is no community cohesion strategy and no clear articulation of what a cohesive community means to Sunderland. Surveys show that, although improving, the percentage of residents who feel people of different backgrounds get on well together locally is much lower than the national average.

- 91 Overall levels of anti-social behaviour are reducing. The Council makes effective use of diversionary activities to target young people to reduce anti-social behaviour. The Council has a high-performing youth offending service and an effective youth service. A range of mechanisms is deployed to reduce anti-social behaviour, in partnership with other agencies including police and fire services. These include acceptable behaviour agreements, neighbourhood policing teams and the Phoenix and Positive Futures programmes. Operation Gryphon, a police and partnership-based initiative to address alcohol-related street disorder has resulted in a fall in disorder incidents reported to police. The Safer Sunderland Partnership has a clear escalation process in place for tackling youth disorder. Overall youth disorder has reduced by 28 per cent in recent years.
- 92 There is a clear strategy for addressing alcohol misuse and some innovative partnership projects are being delivered, including the Trailblazer programme which is delivering screening and brief interventions in the Accident and Emergency Department. 'Alcohol Designation Order areas' and 'Alcohol-Free Zones' were introduced in 2004. The latest residents' survey results show a reduction in those who think people being drunk/rowdy is a problem.
- 93 The Safer Sunderland Partnership has a range of good initiatives to combat the use of drugs. Sunderland has the fastest improving performance in relation to tackling drug misuse in the region. Proactive and imaginative approaches are helping drugs users to quit, including a dedicated library worker and a dedicated sports development worker. The drug treatment service is within the Council's Safer Communities Team and the drug interventions programme has seen an increase in drug users participating in treatment programmes.
- 94 A successful multi-agency approach to accident and injury prevention has reduced accidental deaths and injuries. Activities to reduce road accidents have included traffic safety schemes, the Safer Routes to School initiative covering 60 schools, 'Walkwise' delivered to five to eight-year-olds and 'Zone Rangers' delivered to over 23,000 Year 6 pupils. This has resulted in the average number of people killed or seriously injured on Sunderland's roads reducing by 40 per cent since 1998 achieving the government's target for 2010 ahead of time. The number of children killed or seriously injured has reduced, by over 50 per cent, meeting the government's target to be achieved by 2010. The 'Sunderland Arson Task Force' has helped achieve a 5 per cent reduction in all fire incidents. However, the incidence of arson, in particular of wheelie bins and abandoned cars, is on the increase. The Safer Sunderland Partnership has put in place additional measures to combat both types of arson.
- 95 The Council is performing well in relation to its ability to respond to emergency situations. It has clear plans in place and carries out regular scenario testing of potential civil emergencies. Councillors received training from the Cabinet Office Emergency Planning College and a major exercise is planned for March 2007. Business continuity plans are in place for critical services and a regional Community Risk Register is in place, with a Sunderland version underway.

Healthier communities

- 96 There is a clear shared vision for the key health issues in Sunderland supported by strong multi-agency working between the Council, the TPCT and other partners. Staff throughout the Council are very clear that improving the health of Sunderland's residents is a key priority for the Council, and not just the responsibility of local health services. Sunderland is performing significantly better than average on smoking cessation and teenage conception rates are falling. Performance is poor against key health outcome measures, such as life expectancy where male life expectancy is 74.6 years and female life expectancy is 79 years, compared to the national averages of 77 and 81.3 respectively. These outcomes are improving, but mostly only in line with improvements nationally.
- 97 The Council and its partners engage well with citizens about health. Residents are represented on the Healthy City Partnership through various community groups. Good use is made of consultation as shown, for example, in the recent detailed consultation brochure on the development of a new primary care facility in Washington. The Council uses its own publications to promote the health agenda, and its recent extensively circulated 'Your Wellness Guide' is an attractive publication with well-presented information and advice for residents on how to improve their health. As a result, residents are informed about, and encouraged to participate in the health agenda in Sunderland.
- 98 The Council works very effectively in partnership with the TPCT and it is sometimes difficult to separate respective contributions. The Bunny Hill centre, in particular, is an excellent example of joining up the delivery of health, wellness and other Council services in a single facility. Staff in both organisations feel that they are working to a common agenda, and regard their goals and ambitions as being the same. The plans around further integration are aimed to embed this culture even further - for example, the appointment of a new joint Director of Public Health; and the joining up of health and social care provider services under the Council's new Director post covering health, housing and adult social care.
- 99 The Council's 'Wellness' strategy, although relatively new, is excellent. It shows a clear vision for the contribution the Council can make to encouraging healthier lifestyles. The initiatives under the strategy include encouraging and providing joined up opportunities for physical activity, lifestyle advice and education programmes designed to improve people's quality of life. Implementation has been swift and impressive – particularly the joint provision at Bunny Hill and there are clear plans for taking the strategy forward. Early indicators around take-up amongst target groups such as the over 50s suggest that the strategy is having a significant impact.

- 100** The Council demonstrates that it learns from others in its work on health. Sunderland has received recognition from the World Health Organisation for the impact it has had on health improvement in the city. This Healthy City Status award makes Sunderland part of a network of similar European cities and this has been used, for example, to arrange a recent visit to Denmark to look at how they engage young people in exercise. As a result the Council has been able to introduce innovative ideas to Sunderland.
- 101** The Council's health scrutiny function is strong, and there are good examples of the contribution to the wider health agenda that the review committee has made. Recent reviews have looked at the TPCT structure, older people, and the annual public health report. A review into mental health was particularly strong, and involved councillors receiving specific training in the relevant issues and gaining a clearer understanding of mental health issues.
- 102** Sunderland is performing significantly better than average on smoking cessation and the smoke-free agenda. Sunderland's smoking rates are amongst the highest in the country; however, the throughput for the smoking cessation service has increased by 40 per cent over the last two years, and the success rate of nearly 50 per cent compares well nationally. There are strong links and good working relationships from the TPCT into the Council's environmental health, licensing, trading standards, personnel and scrutiny functions. The Council has worked proactively with local businesses to ensure that Sunderland is well ahead of most other areas in its preparations for the Smokefree England implementation later this year.
- 103** There is a clear strategy around teenage conception which is now reducing the rate. Sunderland has amongst the highest rates in Europe and work has been carried out jointly by the Council and TPCT and targeted directly at those groups most at risk. Performance varies from year to year, but the overall trend is positive, and current projections suggest that the Council will meet its target to reduce the levels of teenage conception by 50 per cent by 2010.
- 104** The Council has made good progress in encouraging children to lead healthier lifestyles. It is on track to deliver its target of 90 per cent of school children taking part in at least two hours of exercise a week, and has already achieved its target for children reaching Key Stage 2 swimming standards. Seventy-three per cent of schools in Sunderland are registered on its healthy schools programme. In its provision of food for schools, the Council provides vegetarian menus and Halal foods, dishes approved by the leaders of the Bangladeshi community.
- 105** The Council makes good use of its personnel policies and internal communications to encourage its staff to lead healthier lives. A major focus of its bi-monthly staff newsletters is on health and wellbeing. In the last year, there have been features on smoking, diet, exercise, mental wellbeing and stress, and alcohol awareness. Staff have taken the opportunity to join the wellness centres and sickness levels are gradually reducing.

Older people

- 106** The Council consults well with older people and provides a good range of services with its partners. Older people issues are considered across other arenas and agendas resulting in positive outcomes for the wider community. There is a clear strategy developing, led at a senior level with good engagement with relevant partners.
- 107** There is a clear strategy being developed for addressing the needs of older people. The Council through the Deputy Chief Executive is leading a comprehensive review of the provision by the Council for people over 50. As a result, a strategy has been developed for the 50+ age group called 'Looking Forward to the Future'. The strategy is endorsed by the Chair of the Older People's Partnership Action Group (OPPAG) who is independent of the Council and was published in October 2006. The strategy will be introduced in two phases, the first of which deals with the Council's role and the second with that of its partners.
- 108** The Council has undertaken effective consultation with older people in developing its strategy. It has commissioned Age Concern to run a number of Older People's forums to gauge the views and priorities of older people. Age Concern employs a person to co-ordinate these forums and to channel their views to the Council. The Council has also arranged for MORI to extract the views of the 55+ group from their survey work for the Council. One of the early key outcomes of the forums was the prioritisation of older people's issues which were fear of crime, social isolation, transport, income and exercise and these now form the basis of the strategy.
- 109** The provision of care services by the Council and its partners are good. Primary care, acute and Council provided adult services are all top-rated by Healthcare Commission and the Commission for Social Care Inspection. The Council has a well-regarded intermediate care service with people transferred to an intermediate care home where they are assessed, while being provided with active support. The Council is succeeding in reducing falls by older people and reducing the consequential rate of admissions and readmission to Hospital. Sunderland was the leading authority nationally in 2004/05 for direct payments. There are 14,000 care alarms in use, which are backed up by a mobile assistance service which responds to a call within 20 minutes.

- 110** The Council with its partners provide a good range of additional services to older people. Additional services involve the provision of educational classes supported by the Council but provided in partnership by Age Concern, home safety services provided by the Fire Service together with the Police Service and the Council's key 'Wellness Strategy' where take-up amongst the over-50s is good indicating that the strategy will have a significant impact. Besides this, OPPAG was allocated £1 million to pilot a number of initiatives including a handyperson scheme, a shuttle bus scheme and a Community Involvement officer - who will be establishing a quality of life baseline. However, the overall strategy is new and at the moment many of the initiatives for older people, although very good in themselves, are not co-ordinated. Also the engagement and involvement of the city's very small, but significant BME community is not strong. Take-up amongst the over-50s is good indicating that the Council's Wellness strategy will have a significant impact.
- 111** Clear structures ensure that older people's issues are considered by the Council and its partners. The 'Champions Group for older people' ensures that older people's issues are raised in different arenas and the portfolio-holders for adult social care and for Neighbourhoods and Streetscene are members of this group. The Director of Age Concern Sunderland has been appointed as e-champion for older people and a strong partnership with Age Concern is in place with Age Concern commissioned to identify a range of older people from across the community to form the older people's forums and to provide meeting places and facilitate the agendas and the publicity for the meetings.
- 112** The Council has worked effectively in partnership with Age Concern and the Citizens Advice Bureau to produce a significant increase in the uptake of benefits. It is estimated that over £1 million pounds has been brought into the local economy as a result.
- 113** The Council has initiated some inter-generational work to increase understanding and respect between young and older people. In the Positive Futures programme in the Southwick area, older people were involved in explaining their youth and demonstrating their old skills in order to enable a better understanding between the two groups. A positive outcome of this work has been a reduction of 75 per cent in youth disorder in the area. This has been an important initiative, since fear of crime is one of the priority areas identified by older people for inclusion in the 50+ strategy.

Children and young people

- 114** The Council's performance in this area is good overall with individual services varying from adequate to good. Outcomes for children and young people are good overall. The capacity to improve is good. Most children and young people appear safe. Children and young people report that they feel safe, although some black and ethnic minority children do not feel safe in some areas of the city. The work of all local services in keeping children and young people safe is adequate with some good features but some weaknesses exist for some of the most vulnerable children. The YOS is performing well.

- 115 The management of services for children and young people is good. There are clear and challenging ambitions for the area set out in a child-focused Children and Young People's Plan which is based on a detailed needs analysis and extensive consultation with children and young people and other stakeholders. However, target setting is only adequate. Increasingly, neighbourhood level data is being used to identify needs. Black and ethnic minority children are adequately reflected in strategic objectives but the access to and delivery of some frontline services are not sufficiently tailored to their needs. Prioritisation is good and these priorities are well understood and owned by managers, frontline staff and partners.
- 116 The capacity of local services to deliver children's services is good. The well established Children's Trust has good links to the LCSB and the Sunderland Partnership. The Corporate Parenting Board is underdeveloped and lacks representation from children and young people. The Council has a good record on value for money and managing its finances. There is significant excess capacity in the secondary school sector and the timescale for improving this position is too long. There is room for further development of joint commissioning. The Council makes good use of partnerships with the community and voluntary sectors.
- 117 The capacity of local services to improve further is good overall and this is in line with the self-assessment of the Council and its partners. Despite a major restructuring, staff remain committed and morale is good. The Director of Children's Services provides a clear outcome-focused vision with strong leadership and a determination to ensure that the voices of children and young people are heard. The Workforce Development Strategy is good but there is room for further work and there are shortages in some key areas, for example qualified social workers. The track record of improving outcomes is generally good and there is a good track record of successful outcomes and impact delivered through specialist project work.
- 118 The impact of the Council in securing the health of children and young people is good; partnership working is good. Some key measures of health are below national averages but many aspects show signs of improvement better than the national rate due to determined action. The Health Improvement lead from the TCPT is a member of the Children's Services Leadership Team and this link is key to the joint effort by the Council and its health partners to improving health outcomes for children in the city. There is a strong health education and Healthy Schools programme, both of which are starting to impact strongly. Not enough has yet been done to improve communication with parents from black and minority ethnic groups to ensure that health services are appropriate for their needs. Health care for looked after children is excellent.

- 119** The impact of services in keeping children safe is adequate. There are good universal services to keep children safe but child protection activity is significantly higher than in similar areas. The recent drive to reduce numbers on the child protection register has resulted in confusions for some social care staff about their new roles. There are some weaknesses in the management of these issues. There is good work to prevent accidents, track missing children and to support families in the community, preventing children becoming looked after. Services for looked after children are good, as are services for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, with effective and well established multi-agency working and information systems, especially in the early years sector.
- 120** The impact of services in helping children and young people to enjoy their education and achieve well is good. Strong partnerships support inclusive practice and are helping to raise further standards of achievement. Support and challenge to early years settings and schools is good. Provision for children educated otherwise than at school is good. There are sufficient school places, although the considerable surplus in the secondary sector is not being tackled quickly enough. Attendance is improving, exclusions are low and support for behaviour improvement is good. Children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make good progress. Access to enrichment and voluntary learning activities is good but young people from black and ethnic minority communities can be disadvantaged due to safety fears.
- 121** The impact of services in helping children and young people to contribute to society is good. Aspects of the work are outstanding but there are significant difficulties experienced by black and minority ethnic children as a result of racism. Children receive good support to develop socially and emotionally and to cope with changes in their lives. There is strong multi-agency support for these services. Almost all children find it easy to get help, advice and information when they need it although the designated children's complaints officer was based in Adult Services at the time of the review and the advocacy service for looked after children does not always comply with regulations. The attention given to ensuring that children and young people are consulted about key developments in services, participate in the delivery of services and are engaged in decisions about their lives is outstanding. Some anti-social behaviour programmes have received national recognition and there are comprehensive support programmes for young offenders.

- 122 The impact of local services in helping children and young people to achieve economic well-being is good. There are excellent partnership arrangements in this area of work, particularly with the Connexions service. Young people from black and ethnic minority groups are well represented in employment, education and training. Collaborative working ensures a wide range of vocational and academic courses for young people. The Council has made very significant investment in children's and young people's projects across the city targeted to the neediest areas and young people are involved in community regeneration initiatives. Most young people can access decent and affordable housing and sport and leisure opportunities, although housing is not good for vulnerable young people discharged from secure establishments or with challenging behaviours. Services for care leavers are good. Transition services for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are improving.

Appendix 1 - Framework for corporate assessment

- 1** This corporate assessment was carried out under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999, under which the Audit Commission has power to inspect local authorities' arrangements for securing continuous improvement. The results of the corporate assessment contribute to the determination of the overall CPA category for an authority, which the Audit Commission is required to assess and report on under section 99 of the Local Government Act 2003.
- 2** The Council's self-assessment provided a key resource in focusing the assessment activity which included consideration of:
 - key documentation, including the Council's improvement plan;
 - updated performance indicators and performance data; and
 - interviews and meetings attended.
- 3** The assessment for Sunderland City Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 22 January to 2 February 2007.
- 4** 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.