

Corporate Assessment Report

May 2008



Comprehensive Performance Assessment

Ribble Valley Borough Council

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For further information on the work of the Commission please contact:

Audit Commission, 1st Floor, Millbank Tower, Millbank, London SW1P 4HQ

Tel: 020 7828 1212 Fax: 020 7976 6187 Textphone (minicom): 020 7630 0421

www.audit-commission.gov.uk

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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 and Improvement

Executive summary

- 3 Ribble Valley Borough Council was assessed as a 'fair' council in 2004. Progress has been made in a number of areas and the Council is performing well. The Council is now rated as 'good'.
- 4 The Borough is distinct in character from many others in East Lancashire, being more rural, less deprived and with a smaller percentage of BME population. The Council has a relatively small workforce and budget. It has a history of delivering services in-house and of providing high quality services; public satisfaction with the Council and its services is high. Partnership working at a local or sub-regional level was not regarded as a high priority by all councillors in the past but this has changed markedly in the last two years. The 2004 corporate assessment identified areas for improvement around clarifying long-term targets, community engagement, prioritisation, people management, performance management and partnership working.
- 5 The Council has a clear strategic vision for the community, which is shared by its partners, for the district to be 'an area with an exceptional environment and quality of life for all; sustained by vital and vibrant market towns and villages, acting as thriving service centres, meeting the needs of residents, businesses and visitors'. Widespread engagement and consultation with communities and stakeholders has shaped the Council's ambitions and priorities to deliver this vision. These ambitions seek to make a real difference for all local people, focusing on the key challenges that face the Borough. The Council demonstrates clear community leadership, particularly through its developing partnership working at a sub-regional and county-wide level which is beginning to deliver improvements for residents in terms of health and housing. Less progress has been made with partnership working to promote community cohesion, and individual accountabilities for the various ambition and cross-cutting agenda are not always explicit.
- 6 The Council is clear about its priorities and how they relate to its ambitions; they are based on good intelligence and are increasingly integrated into the corporate and service plans. Other strategies have been reviewed and made fit for purpose, and linked to action plans. Plans are increasingly aligned with financial planning through the medium term financial strategy. There are examples of resources being shifted to priority areas, but action plans are not all consistently robust and not all priorities have clear long-term outcome-focused targets, nor does available intelligence support the comprehensive delivery of priorities associated with diversity and equalities.

- 7 The Council demonstrates clear political and managerial leadership and has made good progress at enhancing capacity and improving value for money by reviewing processes and structures and developing more joint initiatives. Risk management is strong and financial management sound. Relationships and working between councillors and officers are good. Parts of the support framework, such as aspects of human resources processes, are not yet in place. Staff capacity is limited in a number of areas and has resulted in the slippage of some tasks. Progress on the shared services agenda and on 'modernising' the decision-making process has been slow. Scrutiny is not consistently challenging. The Council has improved user focus, but has been very slow to address equality and diversity which is a reflection on capacity rather than commitment.
- 8 Performance management arrangements are increasingly effective, but are less well-developed with its partners. Monitoring and reporting of progress against targets has developed, and key councillors are now fully involved. Engagement with residents and stakeholders is good and include the development of arrangements for informing and feeding back to residents and stakeholders. Regular performance information covering all aspects of delivery is not produced by all services and benchmarking is not yet used systematically throughout the Council.
- 9 The Council is delivering well against its ambitions and priorities, and can demonstrate some good progress in these areas. This has contributed towards very high satisfaction levels with the Council and its services. The Council has well above the average number of BVPIs in the top quartile compared with the average for all district councils, but the overall rate of improvement across all BVPIs has been less than the average.
- 10 The Council and its partners have been effective at reducing both the levels and the fear of crime among residents. It has effectively contributed to a range of initiatives aimed at reducing youth offending, and at improving the health and quality of life for residents. It has been less successful in achieving its objectives for the environment, particularly in terms of cleanliness and reducing levels of waste, although recycling and composting has significantly improved during the past year. Progress has been made through various initiatives and implementation of policies in protecting and enhancing the environment. The Council can show some solid achievements in housing, in improving the standard of housing, reducing homelessness, providing affordable housing, and supporting people to live safely in their homes.

Areas for improvement

- 11 An up-to-date corporate performance and improvement plan is in place which contains clear ambitions and priorities linked to the sustainable community strategy and vision for the Borough in 2016. The Council needs to develop long-term outcome-focused targets linked to its vision. This will promote a clear understanding of where the Council is aiming, and allow progress against the vision to be measured and evaluated.
- 12 Progress in relation to equality and diversity has been very slow. The council need to show strong leadership of this agenda to ensure that it is prioritised and that it becomes integrated with service planning and delivery. Until the Council addresses these issues it will not be able to take full account of diversity issues in decision-making and service delivery.
- 13 The Council needs to strengthen its strategic approach by: clarifying accountabilities, particularly for its ambitions and the cross-cutting agenda; improving scrutiny of its priorities; and progressing its working around the shared services agenda. This will ensure that focus is strengthened and maximum use made of resources including staff.
- 14 The Council needs to develop stronger frameworks - such as those for training and development and workforce planning - to support both councillors and officers in strategic and operational delivery. This will enhance capacity and make the achievement of priorities more certain, for example by avoiding slippage in project areas such as workforce planning.
- 15 Partnership performance management arrangements - such as those for the Ribble Valley Strategic Partnership - are not yet effective. The Council needs to strengthen its monitoring and evaluation arrangements so that the impact of partnership activity can be more effectively managed.

Summary of assessment scores

Headline questions	Theme	Score*	Weighted score
What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?	Ambition	3	6
	Prioritisation	2	4
What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?	Capacity	2	4
	Performance management	2	4
What has been achieved?	Achievement and Improvement	3	21
Weighted score			39
CPA category			Good
*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			

**Banding thresholds for determining CPA category

Category	Required score
Excellent	45-60
Good	36-44
Fair	28-35
Weak	21-27
Poor	20 or less

Context

The locality

- 16** Ribble Valley Borough is located in Pennine Lancashire and is both the largest district in geographical area within Lancashire and the smallest in population. It covers some 583 square kilometres (226 square miles) with a population of 57,800.¹ Sparsity of population is a key feature. The administrative centre for the Borough is the market town of Clitheroe with a population of 15,000, and Longridge is the industrial and commercial centre for the west of the Borough, with a population of 7,000. The rural areas are characterised by small villages and hamlets, many of which are remote from services and public transport. The main highway link is the A59, and there is a railway line from Blackburn to Clitheroe. The Borough is distinct in character from the other East Lancashire councils which are more urbanised, have higher percentages of BME population and higher levels of deprivation.
- 17** The landscape is generally of a high quality, with some two thirds of the Borough falling within the designated Forest of Bowland Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. There are also ancient woodlands, 39 biological heritage sites, 21 conservation areas, 820 Listed Buildings and 6 sites of special scientific interest.
- 18** Ribble Valley is an affluent area and is ranked 283rd out of 354 in the indices of deprivation for local authority areas in England. No wards are within the 25 per cent most deprived, but five wards are within the worst 10 per cent of all English wards under the Access to Services Index.² Unemployment at 2.4 per cent is well below national (5.3 per cent) and regional averages, and is the lowest in the North West. Earnings are above the national average; however, this masks the wide range of levels of pay, those in agriculture and related activities and tourism being below the national average. The latter accounts for over 10 per cent of employment. Manufacturing is also important, accounting for 23.4 per cent of employment within the Borough.
- 19** There has been an increase in population of 5.2 per cent since 1991, and it is predicted to rise by over 10 per cent in the next ten years. The black and minority ethnic (BME) population is small, less than 2 per cent, and is mainly concentrated in Clitheroe. The resident population is old (20.7 per cent over 60/65 compared with 18.6 per cent for England³), and population projections suggest that this imbalance will continue to increase. The general health of the population is good; of 26 indicators used to measure health, 13 are better and one worse than the national average.

¹ ONS 2006 mid-year estimate

² Index of Multiple Deprivation

³ ONS 2005 mid-year estimate

- 20 The high quality of the environment has led to the area being popular for both retirement and as a commuting area for the larger towns and cities in the North West. This high demand has had the effect of forcing up the price of houses within the Borough, which are amongst the highest in the North West and significantly higher than the East Lancashire average. Affordable housing is a key challenge facing the Council. Crime levels are low, with the Borough having the lowest number of recorded crimes per 1,000 population in the North West.

The Council

- 21 The Council has 40 councillors, with the Conservative Party having majority control and providing the administration. Since May 2007 the Council comprises 29 Conservatives, 10 Liberal Democrats and one independent. Twelve of the councillors are in their first term of office. There is a new Leader, who has held his position since May 2007.
- 22 The Council is a 'Fourth Option' local authority and operates a committee system. There are six service committees, two Overview and Scrutiny committees, an Accounts and Audit committee and a Standards committee. There is also a Parish Council Liaison committee and a cross-party budget working group which advises the Council on budget preparation.
- 23 The Council employs 270 staff, and services are delivered by four departments:
- Chief Executive, including corporate services, human resources, and member services;
 - Development, including environmental health, planning and building control;
 - Community Services, including street scene services, community development and housing; and
 - Resources, which includes legal, ICT, finance, revenues and benefits.

The Chief Executive and the three departmental directors form the Corporate Management Team, which meets weekly.

- 24 In 2007/08 the Council set a General Fund budget of £7.2 million. The net-spend per head of population for 2007/08 is £130.91, and the band D Council tax was set at £128.65, one of the lowest in Lancashire. A five-year capital programme for 2007/12 was approved, totalling £9.2 million, with £2.8 million expenditure planned for 2007/08.
- 25 The Council is in the process of transferring its housing stock to a Registered Social Landlord. It expects the transfer to be completed by April 2008. Most of its services have been retained in-house, with few being externalised or delivered jointly.

- 26 The Council works with a wide range of partnerships in order to achieve the Council's priorities, particularly at the sub-area level of Pennine Lancashire, but also at a county and local level. The local strategic partnership, the Ribble Valley Strategic Partnership (RVSP), was established in 2003 and is chaired by a local businessman. A LSP officer has been in place since October 2005, but the working arrangements have been reviewed in the past year and additional support provided for the partnership in terms of resources. A Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS) was produced in December 2007, and ten themed groups have been set up to deliver the priorities of the SCS. These priorities complement the broader Lancashire Local Area Agreement (2006 to 2009) for which the Council contributes to four of the twelve reward or stretch targets.
- 27 The Council has three broad ambitions which provide the framework for setting its priorities over the next three years. These are:
- to help make people's lives safer and healthier;
 - to protect and enhance the existing environmental quality of our area; and
 - to match the supply of homes in our area with the identified housing needs.
- 28 The corporate assessment in 2004 judged Ribble Valley as 'a fair authority that provides good quality core services and is making positive progress on improving the quality of life for local people.'

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

Ambition

- 29 The Council is performing well in this area. The sustainable community strategy (SCS) and corporate plan set out a clear vision and framework for the Council's ambitions for the community and are based on widespread consultation. There are clear ambitions, with a range of challenging targets covering most of them. The Council makes good use of information, and partnership working has developed effectively in most areas, with the Council providing clear community leadership. Individual accountability for driving the various ambitions and cross-cutting themes is not always explicit.
- 30 There is a clear strategic vision for the community which is shared by the Council and partners of the Ribble Valley Strategic Partnership (RVSP). By no later than 2016 the Council and partners aim to ensure that Ribble Valley will be 'an area with an exceptional environment and quality of life for all; sustained by vital and vibrant market towns and villages, acting as thriving service centres, meeting the needs of residents, businesses and visitors'. This vision is underpinned by the sustainable community strategy (SCS), which is based on widespread consultation with stakeholders and the public and has challenging ambitions with a range of key targets up to 2010. The SCS links to regional and county strategies, including the Local Area Agreement (LAA) and Ambition Lancashire, the countywide community strategy.
- 31 The Council has its own clear ambitions based on the shared vision and linked to the community strategy ambitions. Its three broad ambitions address issues including: the increasingly elderly population, the lack of affordable housing which leads to outward migration of the young, and the need to protect the high quality of the environment. These ambitions are further expressed through nine objectives which demonstrate a good understanding of the differentiated needs of the community, with a specific one involving key actions to ensure that Council activities are inclusive and focused on minority and vulnerable groups, such as with leisure and housing provision. The Council is currently reviewing its ambitions to bring them in line with the new SCS. They have been clearly communicated to staff, partners, stakeholders and the public through various avenues, including the new Annual Report. This helps to ensure that all are aware of what the Council is trying to achieve and how their own plans and activities fit in and support them. However, individual accountability for driving the various ambitions and the cross-cutting agenda is not explicit - not all lead councillor responsibilities are transparent or effectively communicated.

- 32** The Council's ambitions for the Borough are supported by challenging targets. These include seeking to recycle and compost 56 per cent of all waste by 2015, which is very challenging given performance in 2006/07, but is realistic based on the potential of the three-bin system currently being introduced. Other ambitions are aimed at reducing health inequalities amongst key priority groups, although targets are still being developed with the East Lancashire Primary Care Trust (PCT). A range of strategies and service plans support these actions, including those of partners.
- 33** The Council has developed effective consultation and community engagement with its residents, partners and other stakeholders. It has a consultation strategy which is regularly reviewed, and a comprehensive programme of consultation using mechanisms such as regular Feedback electronic surveys, partnership citizen's panels, texting (aimed mainly at the young) and various detailed and service-specific consultations. It has engaged well with specific groups, such as involving young people to identify gaps in homelessness provision and service delivery for that group, leading to a reduction in young homeless. The Council has strong links with the business and voluntary sectors, as well as parish councils and all of these have contributed to the formulation of the Council's ambitions. However, the Council has been slower at developing partnerships in relation to community cohesion. It does not yet make good use of partners such as inter-faith groups, although it is beginning to recognise their potential for helping it achieve the targets in this area. Overall, the Council's approach enables residents and stakeholders to have their views heard by the Council and to contribute towards the formulation of the Council's ambitions.
- 34** The Council makes good use of data and intelligence to develop and shape its ambitions. It has access to a range of information used by the PCT and the LAA, and has been involved with the development of the MADE (Multi-Agency Data Exchange) database used in determining crime and disorder priorities to deliver its ambitions. Sharing information has had an impact on outcomes; identifying key young offenders for the mentoring scheme has reduced this category of offending. Data is also shared with the other districts in East Lancashire, for example, to help inform the work of Elevate, the Housing Market Renewal Partnership, on the wider East Lancashire housing market. This use of data ensures that priorities are clearly based on the needs and aspirations of local communities.

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- 35 The Council demonstrates good community leadership and partnership working is increasingly effective. Councillors are involved with a wide range of local community bodies and take the initiative in dealing with local issues. The Council has focused on those areas which have direct implications for its ambitions for the Borough; playing a leading role in enhancing the RVSP adds value to areas such as housing and community safety and ensures that other stakeholders take an active part. It is also closely involved with the proposed Multi Area Agreement for East Lancashire and the City Development Company, and it chairs the Lancashire Waste Partnership. It is working with other district councils and the county council to identify opportunities for enhanced two-tier working across Lancashire, and with specific projects such as piloting an innovative combined system for collecting recyclables and residual waste on behalf of the Lancashire Waste Partnership. It has taken difficult decisions at times about not getting involved with bodies where the benefit for achieving its ambitions is not so clear, such as Elevate, although it has provided support and detailed information to that body. This outward focus is helping the Council increasingly to draw in support and build consensus for the achievement of its ambitions from outside as well as inside the Borough.
- 36 The Council's increasing reputation for being approachable and willing to work with others to achieve its ambitions has strengthened its partnership working. It is well regarded by many of its partners, and the commitment of staff is widely recognised and praised. This culture runs throughout the Council and has helped ensure that relationships with partners and others are maintained in order to work effectively together.

Prioritisation

- 37 The Council is performing adequately in this area. It is clear about its priorities, which are developed from its ambitions and based on intelligence about its communities. There is a good alignment of corporate, service and financial strategies which are supported by an integrated approach to service planning. This provides a solid framework for delivering the priorities, with a range of detailed action plans, though these are not all consistently robust. There are examples of resources being shifted to priority areas, but not all priorities have robust long-term outcome-focused targets, and there is limited data available concerning the needs and priorities of all minority groups.

- 38 The Council has a clear prioritisation process by which its ambitions are translated into specific priorities and cascaded down through its plans and strategies. Its ambitions are translated into a range of 38 prioritised actions in the corporate performance and improvement plan (CP&IP) which are further developed in service plans and a range of strategies - such as the asset management plan, housing strategy and procurement strategy - with annually agreed actions and targets. For example, the SCS objective, taken from the previous community strategy, to increase the amount of affordable housing is reflected in the Council's ambition 'to provide additional affordable homes throughout the Ribble valley, particularly in the Rural Communities'. This is then developed into three specific priorities in the corporate plan and detailed actions to deliver on them are in the housing service plan.
- 39 The Council's priorities are based on widespread consultation and relate well to both national and local priorities. An example relating to national priorities is the actions included in the corporate and service plans to support the 'Every Child Matters' agenda in partnership with the county council. Local priorities are shaped by consultation with various diverse groups, but there is limited data collected about, and analysis of, the needs of all minority groups. There are examples where such information is used effectively; the Opening Doors Group recognised that taxi drivers were preventing guide dogs for the visually-impaired from travelling in taxis. To prevent this, specific information about guide dogs and the process for getting in and out of taxis was incorporated into the knowledge test for new drivers and awareness briefings were held with existing taxi drivers. This helps to ensure that priorities are meeting most local needs and supporting wider national policies.
- 40 Priorities are increasingly integrated into service plans, with clear targets and accountabilities, and links to the community strategy, but action plans are not consistently robust. Clear links to the community strategy thematic action plans ensures that partners are clear about the Council's and their own roles and responsibilities in delivering on these priorities. Targets cover between one and three years, and the Council is moving towards longer-term targets and refining its target-setting capability at an operational level. Some plans, such as the housing and crime and disorder strategies, are robust, long-established and have detailed action plans with challenging and realistic targets. Others, for example, the consultation strategy, have action plans with targets but not all are specific and measurable, and many are concerned with outputs or processes rather than outcomes that will make a difference to the quality of life of residents.
- 41 The service planning framework is sound. It is now more clearly linked to financial planning through the medium term financial strategy (MTFS). Service plans are required to identify the impacts of cash limited budgets or reductions in services, growth items and efficiency gains. This allows councillors to make more informed decisions on the allocation of resources and will help the Council to demonstrate better value for money in its planning and delivery of services.

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- 42** The Council makes good use of its forward-looking work plan and high level improvement plan to help maintain focus on its priorities. Progress is monitored and reported quarterly to the corporate management team. This process has helped to ensure timely delivery of major projects which support its priorities, such as the transfer of the housing stock.
- 43** There are good examples of learning and sharing across the Council. These include sharing knowledge and the provision of internal training on contractual arrangements and procurement provided by the legal department to other departments. There have also been sessions on financial management delivered by the accountancy section. The Council has also implemented the majority of recommendations from external audits and inspections. These approaches ensure that good use is made of internal knowledge and resources to drive service improvements.
- 44** The Council has a coherent and consistent approach to achieving improvement in priority areas by using its resources flexibly. Resources are shifted to priority areas when necessary. An example of this is the Council diverting monies for playground maintenance to fund sporting facilities for a number of years which were a higher priority in terms of supporting the Council's ambitions and in need of investment. The Council has also moved resources to improve waste management and develop the shared services contact centre in 2007/08. This has led to improvements in two discrete areas to support its priorities. The Council has also displayed flexibility in moving staff between sections to deliver on priorities, such as the use of the conservation officer post to improve performance in development control.

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

Capacity

- 45 The Council is performing adequately in this area. There is clear political and managerial leadership, with good relationships between officers and councillors. Risk management is effective and financial management sound. Capacity is limited in a number of areas, but is being enhanced through increased partnership working, and strategic procurement. Decision-making can be slow, scrutiny needs further development, and there has been slow progress on the shared service agenda, strengthening the approach to human resources, and addressing diversity and equality issues.
- 46 The Council demonstrates clear political and managerial leadership. Relationships between senior officers and councillors are good, with mutual understanding of their respective roles, for example through a comprehensive Constitution of the Council and scheme of delegation which includes a clear ethical framework. There are frequent meetings between the Leader and Chief Executive to discuss policy and other issues. They demonstrate effective political and managerial leadership and are highly respected by partners. Councillors consider officers to be very dedicated, and there is a clear culture of support and respect between officers and councillors, including a collaborative and inclusive style of leadership in committees. Challenge between officers and councillors does take place, but it is not always vigorous. The quality of leadership and working relationships between officers and councillors supports effective delivery of the Council's objectives.
- 47 Decision-making arrangements are clear and transparent but can be slow. For example, the introduction of the three-bin refuse collection and recycling scheme has required detailed consultation with councillors over each stage, resulting in a slow roll-out of the programme. On some occasions councillors become too involved in operational matters, in particular with front-facing services such as street scene and with minor changes to personnel. The Council did set up a working group in January 2007 to explore ways to 'modernise' the current arrangements but this was not progressed at the time. Without improved decision-making processes it will be more difficult for the Council to ensure that councillors retain a strategic focus and the capability to respond more quickly to opportunities. This will become increasingly important as the Council develops further partnerships and participates in joint working within cross-cutting areas.

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- 48** The Council has been very slow to comprehensively address and embed equality and diversity. Whilst there are examples of engaging with various diverse groups, such as the young homeless, vulnerable groups such as the disabled and ethnic minorities, Equality Level 1 has only recently been achieved. Progress is being made with impact assessments in pilot areas but training for staff and councillors has not been provided. Until the Council addresses these issues it will not be able to take full account of diversity, user focus, and human rights issues in decision-making and service delivery.
- 49** Scrutiny is not consistent in its degree of challenge. There are two scrutiny committees; councillors on them have been trained and processes such as performance clinics have been introduced to help focus on improving poorly-performing services. However, the extent of challenge provided by the committees is inconsistent. Some councillors serve on service committees as well as scrutiny which makes it harder to demonstrate impartiality. No dedicated resource is provided to support the work of scrutiny. Without a more rigorous approach it is unlikely that scrutiny will maximise its potential for contributing to service improvement.
- 50** Risk management arrangements have been improved and are effective. There is a comprehensive risk management strategy, a Risk Management Working Group which meets on a quarterly basis, and regular reports on risk management are sent to Overview and Scrutiny (Resources) Committee. There is a lack of ownership of risk management by some service managers which is now being addressed. All major partnerships - including parish councils - have also been identified, and risk profiles are maintained and updated for these. These arrangements have helped to improve project management and delivery of the capital programme.
- 51** The Council has enhanced its capacity through internal restructuring, external funding and partnership working. It has reviewed its structure and increased corporate capacity through the creation of new posts. This has also enhanced the ability of directors to focus more strategically and to delegate more effectively to service managers; this has led to demonstrable improvements in areas such as health and safety, communications and risk management. Capacity has also been enhanced through successful bidding for external funding in line with council priorities. Examples of successfully attracting funds include a £2 million Heritage Lottery Grant towards a £3.2 million project to redevelop the Clitheroe Castle Museum. The Council is modernising its processes and using partnership working to enhance capacity and provide value for money. It has developed a sound procurement strategy with a clear focus on environmental sustainability in line with its corporate priority in this area. The East Lancashire E-Partnership has produced a three-year Forward Plan which identifies potential savings for all members on procurement and consultation through joint working and skills transfer. However, progress on shared services has yet to deliver significant benefits and is still being developed as part of the county-wide Transforming Lancashire agenda.

- 52 The Council has adequate ICT resource to deliver its priorities but there is limited capacity for further growth and development of systems. All functions are provided in-house and there are few opportunities for further efficiency savings. The focus of ICT is to provide the infrastructure at an operational level to enable achievement of priorities. Electronic systems have increasingly replaced manual ones, including those for refuse collection logging. As a result a number of benefits have been realised from e-government, including e-procurement, e-consultation, e-payments, and the shared services contact centre including a customer relationship management system.
- 53 Financial capacity and management is sound. The finance team has the required skills and competences, and financial monitoring is good. In 2007 the Use of Resources assessment improved from Level 1 to Level 3. The Council has a rising level of reserves, with £1.3 million in General Fund Balances and £2.9 million in earmarked reserves. Budgeting is improving and the provision of more detailed financial information is helping councillors to decide on priorities, although the link between policy and financial planning is still developing. This financial capacity will help the Council to achieve its objectives.
- 54 The Council is investing in its workforce but capacity is limited in a number of key areas. Staff training and development arrangements are good, leading to a well qualified and motivated work-force. Staff are able to access appropriate levels of training needed to complete their roles. Cascading of training is encouraged throughout the Council. As a consequence staff feel valued and staff turnover is very low, averaging 3.5 per cent for 2006/07, and likely to be lower for 2007/08. The Council has also significantly improved staff attendance; levels of sickness absence are now in the best performing quartile. The Council has continuity in staffing levels to help to achieve its priorities and sustain day-to-day delivery of services. However, limited capacity is affecting performance in a few key areas, such as Human Resources, where systems and processes are not yet sufficiently robust. One example is the performance appraisal system, which only has a 70 to 80 per cent completion rate; another example is progress on workforce planning, which has been delayed as priority was given to job evaluation. The lack of capacity prevented both tasks from being delivered simultaneously. The Council has yet to decide whether current posts supported by short-term funding - such as those supporting the RVSP and community safety - will be mainstreamed when funding ends. This creates uncertainty among staff and other stakeholders about continuity and long-term commitment. Until workforce planning is developed the Council's ability to deliver on its ambitions and priorities will not be maximised.

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- 55 Councillor training has improved over the past year but is still under-developed. Poor uptake of training by councillors in previous years has improved slightly with the new councillor intake last year. However, there is not a councillor training register and a training-needs analysis has not taken place. Councillors are encouraged to access the 'modern councillor on-line learning facility' and to use the Councillors' intranet portal to access information but the Council does not have information about the level of uptake. The Council did commission external training for overview and scrutiny members, but without effective monitoring and review arrangements it cannot evaluate the consistency and impact of such training.

Performance management

- 56 The Council is performing adequately in this area. Performance management arrangements within the Council are increasingly effective and have resulted in improvements in previously poorly-performing areas. Performance management arrangements are less well-developed with partners. Monitoring is comprehensive and the arrangements provide opportunities for challenge by councillors and officers. Engagement with residents and stakeholders is good, with complaints used effectively to drive service improvements. Benchmarking is developing but is not yet consistent across all services and data collection is not always timely or accurate.
- 57 Performance management arrangements are increasingly effective. The introduction of a comprehensive performance management framework has markedly improved monitoring and reporting of performance using traffic light reporting. The Council now routinely monitors key performance indicators and improvement plans. Priorities from the SCS are linked through the corporate plan to individual service plans. Councillors are increasingly involved in managing performance, including the use of performance clinics, but the impact of the clinics has yet to be demonstrated. Challenges still remain around the ownership and use of performance indicators by all service managers. These changes have promoted improvements across a range of poorly performing service areas, such as development control, housing, and waste management.
- 58 Strong performance management systems have not yet been developed with partners. Monitoring of the SCS actions plans is variable; there are processes in place through the thematic groups of the RVSP to monitor progress, but these are not yet all effective. The reports do not always state the current position, and, where slippage has occurred, the reason and implications. Without effective monitoring it will be difficult for thematic groups to own the action plans and to engage with partners responsible for delivery on a regular and ongoing basis.
- 59 The Council has comprehensively reviewed its local performance indicators. This followed a performance management day held in July 2006 which was attended by the Audit Commission's relationship manager and the external auditor. As a result the Council has rationalised its PI suite to ensure that those which remain support the effective monitoring of corporate and service priorities.

- 60 Regular performance information covering all aspects of delivery is not consistently produced by all services. For example, monitoring the planning service covers local and national performance indicators and user satisfaction, but not aspects such as service accessibility and the impact of enforcement actions. Furthermore, there are still weaknesses in data collection and accuracy; for example, in relation to street cleansing, where the best value indicators for 2006/07 were qualified. Other performance information, for example that relating to biodiversity, is held by other bodies and is not readily available. Planning systems cannot analyse data that contributes to some local and core indicators, such as the percentage of applications approved in the Bowland Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty by type. Without more timely and accurate data the Council's objectives will not be able to accurately evaluate progress towards its objectives.
- 61 The Council has increased its user focus. It has improved access to its buildings and services and provided better access for disabled people to the main Council offices at Clitheroe. A 'Ribble Valley on the Road' bus is being used to promote youth initiatives, a mobile office is used to provide information and services to dispersed communities and Longridge police station is now an additional contact point for information on Council services. The Council web-site has been improved, more service transactions are now available by telephone, and progress has been made in improving access through the contact centre partnership. These initiatives are helping the Council to improve access for users throughout the Ribble Valley.
- 62 The Council makes good use of complaints to drive service improvements. It revised its procedures in April 2006, and reports regularly to the CMT and Overview and Scrutiny, providing details of complaints, lessons learned and actions taken, such as changes to the way services are delivered and information provided. These actions improve the quality of services and the user experience.
- 63 The Council's annual report provides clear information for residents and stakeholders about the Council's performance. It is simple to understand and is user-focused. It includes national and local performance and financial and budgetary information. It sets out what has been achieved and what is planned. As a result the community and its partners have a good picture of how the Council is performing, especially against its ambitions and priorities.
- 64 The Council is open to external challenge and makes effective use of opportunities to learn. When revising its asset management plan the Council included comments made by organisations such as the Government Office for the North West (GONW), including the establishment of an Asset Management Group to oversee the strategic use of property and wider use of consultation on its use.
- 65 The use of benchmarking to assess and improve performance is developing, but is not yet consistent across the whole Council. An example of good practice is the Revenue and Benefits service which was involved in a Lancashire-wide benchmarking group since its inception. Since its involvement in this group, the service has achieved the highest possible score from the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate and has consistently performed well.

What has been achieved?

Achievement and Improvement

- 66** The Council is performing well in this area. It is achieving well against its priorities of safer and healthier communities, protecting the environment and matching the supply of homes with identified housing needs. The Council is making good progress against the Local Area Agreement (LAA) targets, including the provision of affordable housing and bringing empty homes back into use, as well as reducing crime through a range of initiatives. In all of these areas the Council can demonstrate outcomes which have made a difference to the quality of life of individuals and communities in line with its priorities.
- 67** The Council delivers good quality services. The Council has 39 per cent of its 2006/07 BVPIs in the best performing quartile, compared to an average of 33 per cent for all district councils. It has a track record of strong performance in areas such as transactional services, benefits, housing, and safe and stronger communities. It has addressed areas of poorer performance identified during the last corporate assessment, such as dealing with planning applications. Improvement over the last three years was below the average compared to all district councils, but over the last year the rate of improvement has increased. The good quality of services is recognised by service users and communities. In 2006, 63 per cent were satisfied with the Council's service, the highest level of satisfaction in the North-West.
- 68** Improved achievement is supported by the results of external inspection. Inspections of Development Services and Environment Services undertaken by the Audit Commission since the last corporate assessment judged both services as 'good'. The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate scored the Council as '4' for its Benefits service, an improvement from '2' in 2003. The service now meets 11 out of 12 housing benefit performance standards and 55 out of 65 enablers.
- 69** The Council is also contributing well through partnership working to national priorities such as improving outcomes for children and young people. A lead officer and councillor have now been agreed and the RVSP is being restructured around the LAA themes, one of which specifically addresses children and young people. This will help to ensure that the national priority of 'Every Child Matters' is implemented as effectively as possible within Ribble Valley.
- 70** The remainder of this section assesses achievement against the Council's three aims and linked objectives: to make people's lives safer and healthier, to protect and enhance the existing environmental quality of the area, and to match the supply of homes in the area with the identified housing needs.

To help make people's lives safer and healthier

- 71 The Council has three objectives linked to this ambition which are: to reduce the levels and perceptions of crime and disorder; to increase opportunities for people to access cultural activities; and to improve the health of people living in the area. It has also developed four priority outcomes against which to assess achievement, namely: a borough where people feel safer; people freed from the experience of anti-social behaviour; fewer young people turning to crime; and more people actively improving their health and well-being.

Safer communities

- 72 The Council and its partners have been effective at reducing levels of crime and disorder. Ribble Valley has the lowest number of recorded crimes per 1,000 population of any local authority area in the North West, and the CDRP is on target to exceed its reduction targets for 2007/08. During the first ten months of 2007/08 comparator crimes in the Borough reduced by some 22.6 per cent compared with the same period in 2006/07. This was the second highest percentage reduction in Lancashire. There is a high level of satisfaction with the Council's approach to making the area safer; 72 per cent of respondents believe that the Council is working effectively to make the area safe, which is top quartile performance and ninth best nationally. This has helped people to feel safer - the proportion of people who feel safe in the day and after dark is respectively above or at the national average, and well above the regional average.
- 73 The Council and its partners have made effective use of baseline data and information to help working with young people to reduce drug and alcohol abuse and other anti-social behaviour. Drug education workers, supported by the Council, target schools and provide outreach support, which has reduced the number of young people experimenting with illegal drugs. A mobile facility which targets support for young people is run by a combination of agencies including the Council to provide advice and counselling in areas where there is no static provision.
- 74 The Council has effectively contributed to wider community outcomes through its community safety partnership working. For example, a mentoring scheme - part of the Criminal Damage Working Group, chaired by the Council - provided vocational and social support for ten youth offenders which led to a reduction in offending behaviour from these individuals. However, the requirement for all services to consider the implications of their delivery approach on crime and disorder is not yet implemented adequately across all services. Until crime reduction and community safety issues are considered in all decision-making processes the Council will not achieve maximum impact against its priority outcomes.
- 75 The Council is also making good use of its own facilities to achieve its priorities. It provides diversionary schemes aimed at young people, such as the Ribble Valley Sports Club. This is an inter-agency venture run by the Council's Community Sports Facilitator which targets young people in the 13-16 age group, and offers a range of sports. This initiative has helped to reduce vandalism and petty crime by young people.

Healthier communities

- 76 Strong partnership working is helping the Council achieve its priority for a healthier community, within the context is of a borough which has fewer health-related challenges than some adjacent areas. It has developed a health improvement plan with the East Lancashire PCT and established a strategic health improvement group in place to deliver on specific targets and actions. The Council works well with the PCT: it is jointly funding a facility at Longridge School; is working closely with the PCT over the replacement of Clitheroe Hospital; and commissioned a joint study on health and homelessness to identify weaknesses in the health service for homeless households. Strong links have been developed between housing staff and health visitors. Its support of drug action workers has seen a reduction in the number of young people experimenting with illegal drugs, and the youth road bus has reached over 1,000 young people with advice and counselling about health issues. The contribution to disabled adaptations has resulted in 60 council and 39 private sector homes being adapted in the last financial year. These initiatives have supported the Council's priority for improving the health of the community and raised the general level of health awareness within the Council and the wider community.
- 77 The Council is making good progress in helping to tackle health issues through a range of initiatives. It promotes its leisure facilities as a way of tackling health issues, such as reducing obesity and mortality from associated long-term conditions which is a priority area for action. The Council receives a recurrent grant from the PCT to fund physical activity programmes in the community geared towards addressing the incidence of cardiac disease through physical activity and improved nutrition advice. The referral scheme has seen a doubling of people using the programme from 300 in 2003 to over 600 in 2007, and retention in the 12-week programmes has also risen to 57 per cent. Follow up after six months shows that 70 per cent of clients are maintaining their lifestyle changes.
- 78 The Council has negotiated community use of sports facilities at two High Schools, and introduced 'Stepping Out', a health walks programme which has an average monthly take-up of 650 people. The Council has also introduced Pathways to Work, using physical activity as part of a condition management programme for people with long-term sickness issues, which aims to re-introduce them to the job market.
- 79 The Council is developing its approach to tackling health inequalities. Effective partnership activity to tackle health improvements has provided a strong base for a future focus on health inequalities. It has made a two year commitment to the PCT, beginning in April 2008, to tackle health inequalities as a focused contribution towards improving the health of the community.

To protect and enhance the existing environmental quality of our area

- 80** The Council has three objectives linked to this ambition which are: to recycle and compost 56 per cent of all waste by 2015 in accordance with the Waste Management Strategy; to provide a high quality environment, keeping land clear of litter and refuse, and reducing the incidents of dog fouling; and to conserve the countryside, the natural beauty of the area and enhance the built environment. It has also developed two priority outcomes against which to assess achievement, namely: the quality of the natural and built heritage is valued by all; and people feel their environment is healthier and cleaner.
- 81** The Council has set a challenging target to recycle and compost 56 per cent of waste by 2015. This is well above the national target of 50 per cent to be achieved by 2020. It has secured funding for improving this performance by introducing the three-bin waste collection service which is gradually being rolled out across the Borough. It has secured strong public support for this approach through widespread consultation and piloting. Unaudited figures for the first three quarters of 2007/08 indicate that performance is now around 33 per cent. This is a significant increase over the figures for 2006/07 (21.4 per cent) which was worst quartile performance, and shows the impact of the Council's investment. The Council is also slowly reducing the amount of waste generated in the Borough and has second quartile performance; this is similar to the national trend. It has produced a waste awareness and education strategy which has helped to maintain good performance in this area.
- 82** The Council's performance at keeping land clear of litter and refuse is poor in terms of performance indicators. However, the Council receives few complaints about cleanliness - related mainly to weed control - and satisfaction with street cleanliness is in the top quartile and has improved since the 2003/04 survey. The Council has halved the numbers of abandoned vehicles, from 72 in 2005/06 to 36 in 2006/07, and has raised its target for removing them following notification from 100 per cent in two days to 100 per cent in one day for 2008/09. In 2006/07 the existing target was met in 97 per cent of cases.
- 83** The Council is making reasonable progress on conserving the countryside and the natural beauty of the area and enhancing the built environment. It works with partners and relevant bodies to care for and manage natural habitats and features, such as the Bowland Wader project which creates and improves habitats for curlews, lapwings and redshanks, and has been praised by the RSPB as an excellent example of a species recovery programme. The Council supports landscape improvements through its grants for tree and hedgerow planting, creation of ponds and habitats and small woodland schemes. It protects the countryside by encouraging the provision of additional housing on previously developed land and through conversions of existing buildings; in 2006/07, 78 per cent of housing built was on such sites which. This was below average for all district councils, but with no recorded vacant brownfield sites in the Borough (which is top quartile performance for that indicator) more development had to be on greenfield sites.

- 84 It is also making good progress in enhancing the built environment. The Council has completed area appraisals for all conservation areas; these will provide better detailed guidance for future development to ensure these areas continue to be protected and enhanced. It has won a Green Apple award for toilets in the village of Slaidburn, which are also energy and water efficient.
- 85 The Council's approach to sustainability, including the climate change agenda, has yet to demonstrate significant impacts. The Council's support for a strategy for sustainable tourism within the Bowland Forest Area of Natural Beauty has received international recognition, and it has made some progress at delivering sustainable procurement. It has joined other authorities in Lancashire to support the Lancashire Declaration (based on the Nottingham Declaration) but this has not yet impacted consistently on its priorities or its service planning. There has been no progress on securing any form of environmental audit scheme, such as the environmental management and audit scheme (EMAS) or ISO 140001 for its own operations.

To match the supply of homes in our area with the identified housing needs

- 86 The Council has three objectives linked to this ambition which are: to provide additional affordable homes throughout the Ribble Valley, particularly in rural communities; to meet the housing needs of the community; and to improve the condition of the private sector housing stock and bring empty properties back into use. It has also developed three priority outcomes against which to assess achievement, namely: everybody has a satisfactory home to live in; provision of the right number of affordable homes in the Borough to meet priority need; and all residents can access the support they need to live safely in their homes.
- 87 The Council has made good progress in achieving its priority of everybody having a satisfactory home to live in. Only 2 per cent of public sector homes in Ribble Valley do not meet the Government's Decent Homes Standard (DHS) - a 7.7 per cent change since the previous year. This achievement is above both regional and national average, and in the top quartile. There are no rough sleepers in the Borough and no cases of repeat homelessness. The level of tenant satisfaction with both their landlords and with opportunities for participation is top quartile performance. The transfer of the Council's housing stock will see around £65 million invested in tenants' homes over the next 30 years which is intended to ensure that the standard of the housing continues to be maintained and improved beyond the DHS and will continue to deliver real benefits to the tenants.

- 88 The Council makes good use of its planning and housing powers and grants to improve the range of housing available. It makes landlord/tenant grants to assist landlords to renovate affordable rented properties, and in return receives tenancy nomination rights and sets an affordable rent for five years. Some 35 privately rented properties have been improved using this scheme during the past three years. An empty property strategy was introduced in 2004, and the Council has exceeded its target of bringing 12 empty properties annually back into use for the past two years. It has used section 106 planning obligations to deliver a range of affordable housing.
- 89 The Council is making good use of its powers under housing legislation to tackle issues of homelessness. The homeless strategy has been updated and homeless accommodation in Longridge and Clitheroe improved in partnership working with housing associations. This has allowed the Council to all but halt the use of bed and breakfast accommodation to house homeless people - only one household was placed in such accommodation during 2007. It has also reduced the length of stay of homeless people in hostel accommodation. This was the result of introducing a tenancy protection scheme in 2005, which has assisted 45 households to be granted private housing sector tenancies and of strong working relationships with landlords which prevented 14 cases in 2006/07. An increase in young people becoming homeless in 2006 led the Council in partnership with Lancashire Education Authority to deliver a youth homeless education programme to all secondary schools. Feedback from the young people was good and youth homelessness has been significantly reduced.
- 90 The Council provides clear community leadership in seeking to improve the provision of affordable housing and demonstrates strong partnership working. Improving the numbers of affordable housing was highlighted as important to residents, reflecting both the desirability of living in Ribble Valley and consequential high house prices. The Council has worked with the RVSP, a local charitable trust and a Registered Social Landlord to establish the first Community Land Trust in the North West in the village of Chipping - building 11 affordable dwellings for local people in housing need. Other schemes have been provided using a range of partners and demonstrating a willingness to be innovative.
- 91 The Council is making good progress with partners in providing affordable houses. In 2006/07 it enabled 62 units to be built through working with RSLs but also by purchasing and repairing properties. For 2007/08 it has 54 properties with planning permission and funding secured, and a further 57 dwellings at an advanced stage of discussion. This is less than its target of 100 dwellings per annum which it subsequently found to be unrealistic; a new target of 150 affordable dwellings over three years has been adopted for 2008/09 onwards.

- 92 The Council is making good progress against its priority of supporting the needs of elderly and disabled people to live safely in their homes. In the past three years grants have enabled 106 private dwellings to be adapted to meet the specific needs of disabled occupiers. Work has been undertaken in partnership with social services to deliver extra care to tenants in St Anne's Court sheltered housing scheme in Clitheroe. A dedicated team provides 24-hour care which enables tenants to remain in their own home, and the Council provides signposting to counselling and emotional groups appropriate to tenants' cultural needs.

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 Ribble Valley Borough Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 28 January to 1 February 2008.
- 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.