

# Corporate Assessment

St Albans City and District Council

February 2009



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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

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# Executive summary

- 3 St Albans City and District Council is a 'good' Council that is performing well. This is an improvement on its 'fair' assessment in 2004.
- 4 Overall services are of high quality and provide good value for money to the residents of St Albans. The Council has delivered good, if not always uniform performance against its priorities. Residents are very satisfied with the Council overall and with several services. Targeted action has seen strong improvement in planning, recycling and addressing the needs of homeless people, reduced anti-social behaviour and provision of good quality parks and improved leisure opportunities. The Council listens to the people it provides services to, acts on what it hears and changes services to meet needs.
- 5 The Council has a clear, challenging, shared and well understood set of ambitions that display a strong sense of place. Targets underpin ambitions and align well with the Council's and community strategy's priorities. However, a lack of consensus exists around how best to deliver sustainable development while preserving the green belt and St Albans historic environment; current visioning work seeks to correct this. Community leadership at a senior level is good but varies widely at ward level.
- 6 Overall the Council knows what is important to most local people and uses this knowledge well to focus and co-coordinate action to improve outcomes for local people. Priorities are clear, shared across partners and well understood. They reflect the local needs of most communities if not all minority ethnic groups. Challenging, largely outcome focused targets drive the improvement process. Sound strategies are in place to deliver priorities. Partners, service users and staff contribute well to action planning.
- 7 The Council has adequate capacity to sustain improvement. The Council is well led and is embedding a less risk averse, more responsive and 'can do' culture. Staff are competent, well trained, and committed; morale is high and sickness low, although many staff feel unduly pressurised. Financial management and procurement are sound, risk and staff management adequate. However, a lack of capacity in some key areas such as planning services and finance has delayed progress. The Council makes good use of external funding but an inconsistent approach to partnerships means it is not yet getting the best from working with others. Tensions with the County Council at a senior level obstruct full joint working. The Council understands its capacity pressures and has the means to improve. However, budget cuts and demands for more service efficiencies present a real challenge to a lean organisation with pressured staff.
- 8 Performance is monitored and reported well but is not consistently managed across the Council and its partnerships. Corrective action to address underperformance is inconsistent and not always timely. Best practice is not routinely shared internally or with partners. Needs based service planning is not embedded. The Council is yet to integrate the ways it manages performance into a fully integrated improvement framework that provides the uniformly 'excelling' services it seeks to deliver; but it has the means to do so.

# Areas for improvement

- 9 The Council should constantly deploy and fully integrate its performance management framework to consistently manage and improve its performance. This entails integrating and sharing its best practice and the thinking, training, briefing and deployment behind all aspects of its performance framework, including: service review and planning, benchmarking, standards and target setting, staff appraisal and use of scrutiny. This should help the Council lever up all areas of under performance to deliver and sustain the universally high performing services its vision and ambitions task it to achieve.
- 10 The Council should improve the impact and added value it gets from its partnership working. It could do this by implementing the full range of recommendations contained in the September 2008 Audit Commission report on partnerships, delivering benefits from the Pathfinder approach to delivering seamless services and achieving more consistent and integrated working with the County Council. This will help the Council to meet local need better delivering more seamless and cost effective services.
- 11 The Council needs to ensure it builds and maintains its staffing capacity beyond the medium term to ensure it delivers its ambitions and priorities. This requires it to deploy staff with the capacity and capability to address areas of under-performance in a timely way and deliver existing, new and emerging priorities.
- 12 The Council should complete and use its visioning work to build a consensus about how best it can balance housing and infrastructure development with sensitivity to the historic environment of St Albans. This work provides an ideal opportunity to fully engage and involve all communities, develop its partnership working, and create lasting structures, partnerships and delivery mechanisms to ensure the District develops in an environmentally sustainable way which meets the needs of all residents.

# Summary of assessment scores

Headline questions	Theme	Score*	Weighted Score
What is the Council, together with its partners trying to achieve?	Ambition	2	4
	Prioritisation	3	6
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	3	21
<b>Overall Corporate Assessment Score **</b>			<b>39</b>
<b>*Key to scores</b>			
1 – below minimum requirements – <b>inadequate performance</b>			
2 – at only minimum requirements – <b>adequate performance</b>			
3 – consistently above minimum requirements – <b>performing well</b>			
4 – well above minimum requirements – <b>performing strongly</b>			

## \*\* 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

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### The locality

- 13** St Albans and City District (hereafter the District) covers an area of 161 square kilometres with a population density of 821 people per square kilometre. The district lies in the heart of Hertfordshire and is only 20 miles from the centre of London. The city of St Albans grew out of the Roman town Verulamium and the area has many important sites of historic interest. The population is mainly based in the areas of St Albans, Harpenden, Wheathampstead, London Colney, Redbourn, Park Street, Chiswell Green and Bricket Wood.
- 14** Mid-year population estimates (2006) report 131,500 live in the District. The District has higher than national average population of people aged 0 to 14 with activities for teenagers one of the top three resident priorities for improvement. The area has a lower than average proportion of people aged 15 to 29 and of working age. It has a Black Minority Ethnic (BME) population of 6.9 per cent (Office of National Statistics 2004). The Bangladeshis form the largest minority group. A well-established Italian community and a less well established but increasing community from Eastern Europe in particular from Poland, adds to the cultural mix of the District.
- 15** The District is a wealthy area, ranking 333 out of 354 when compared to other local authorities; putting it among the 10 per cent least deprived districts - Index of National Deprivation. However, wide relative gaps in deprivation exist. There are pockets of social and economic inequality, such as in Sopwell ward, where individuals and groups are not experiencing the same high quality of life.
- 16** St Albans is one of England's healthiest districts with high life expectancy and low rates of premature death. But significant inequalities exist. People in the healthiest wards are likely to live on average 6.2 years longer than those in the least healthy wards. Access to health services is the second most important issue for residents in what makes somewhere a good place to live; and is now one of the Council's new priorities. Levels of smoking and obesity are better than the national average but still one in six adults smokes and one in seven is obese.
- 17** Crime levels are falling ahead of target but remain higher than average for the Hertfordshire Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership area. Fear of crime is falling but remains above the regional average although the percentage of residents who feel safe outside after dark is above regional and national averages.
- 18** Unemployment is lower and gross weekly earnings significantly higher than average for the region and nationally. The District has high inward and outward commuting. 51 per cent of the population commutes out of the District to work while 42 per cent of local employees commute into the District.

- 19 Many residents have concerns about the shortage of affordable housing in the District. Average house prices are high, at an average cost of £402,027 (January to March 2008). The Government target for extra housing within the District in the period 2001 to 2021 is 7,200. Developing affordable housing is therefore a priority for the Council which has increased the proportion of affordable units within new developments (of 15 houses and above) to 35 per cent. Owner occupation, at 77 per cent, is high and well above the England average of 68.5 per cent. The Council manages its own housing stock of around 5,300 properties.
- 20 The District is under pressure to deliver growth due to its strategic location to main transport routes and its proximity to London. The Council has a difficult task to balance the priority to save its green character with the need for extra housing and effective infrastructure to support the community. It is legally challenging the East of England's Regional Spatial Strategy for housing totals for the District as it believes the strategy does not consider its full environmental impact on the green belt.
- 21 Sport England data for 2005/06 stated that 50.87 per cent of the population is within 20 minutes of a range of three different sports facility types, this is above the national average (31.64 per cent) and the highest among its geographical neighbours. Despite this success, accessible activities for young people remain a concern of District residents. This has prompted the Council to extend and improve its offer for young people, such as introducing a mobile skate park and the other activities detailed in the achievement section of this report.
- 22 A recent World Wildlife Fund report concluded St Albans had the second worst environmental footprint in England due to the combination of development pressures, congestion and high-income households.

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## The Council

- 23 A Liberal Democrat administration, with an overall majority of two, has led the Council since May 2008. The Liberal Democrats have been the largest party for several years, and have appointed a Liberal Democrat Leader and Cabinet since June 2004. However, before this, there was regular rotation of leadership between the three political parties. The Council runs on a Leader and Cabinet model, with two Overview and Scrutiny Committees and a range of other committees set out in the Constitution.
- 24 General spending by the Council for 2007/08 was £17.4 million (net) and housing revenues £21.8 million (gross) with a planned spend for 2008/09 of £18 million (net) plus housing revenues £23.5 million (gross). The capital budget for 2008/09 is £11.8 million. The Council has 305 full-time and 96 part-time staff - November 2008 figures.

## Context

- 25 The Chief Executive has been with the Council for the last two years but before this the Council operated without a Chief Executive for some years. During that time it ran with three strategic directors, which was perceived by staff, residents and partners to have resulted in fragmented decision-making and leadership. A management restructuring, completed in the last year, introduced a flatter structure with the Chief Executive leading the Chief Executive's Board, consisting ten heads of service. Two of these have deputising roles; the Chief Policy and Partnership Officer focusing on external matters and the Chief Financial Officer deputising on internal issues. These changes were introduced by the administration in the face of resistance from some politicians and senior managers which delayed both approval for a Chief Executive and the restructuring proposals. The latter only came into effect from February 2008. This has constrained the pace of change since 2006 the new culture the Chief Executive has sought to bring about.
- 26 The Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) Sustainable Community Strategy 'Shaping Our District Together for 2021', agreed in June 2007, identifies a vision for St Albans: 'We want to continue to be a progressive, unique and vibrant district, which values its heritage and acres for the future: an outstanding place to live where everyone can flourish'. Three priorities underpin the vision: ensuring the district is a great place to be, keeping the district healthy and supporting an active community that takes pride in itself. Priorities are driven by a common theme to deliver the best outcome for every single member in the community.
- 27 The Council's Corporate Plan 2008/11 also identifies a vision for St Albans. Full Council refocused this in September 2008 to: 'Historic St Albans District: a premier community'.
- 28 The Corporate Plan commits the Council to excellence in everything it does and sets out how it will contribute to the delivery of the sustainable community strategy. The Council underpins its vision with five key aims: to build a community, which is open, fair and inclusive; to work in partnership for the health and well-being of the community; to cherish and promote our heritage, arts and culture; to safeguard the environment; and to ensure the District is a desirable place in which to live, learn, work and visit.
- 29 The new administration in 2008 has chosen four medium-term key corporate priorities and several service priorities to sharpen its focus on fulfilling its vision and aims. These include: new leisure facilities and improved activities for young people; producing the Local Development Framework including the City Vision and protecting the green belt; provide visible improvements to the street scene; and keeping Council Tax below the Retail Price Index while ensuring quality services for residents. This requires the Council to be more creative about options for service provision, income generation, realising efficiencies and making its assets work better. Its Business Improvement Programme seeks to ensure it realises this challenge, while maintaining an adequate medium term level of reserves and resources to sustain improvement and deliver its declared priorities.

- 30 Highlighted service priorities include: reducing the fear of crime, reducing deprivation in wards with higher deprivation levels than the national average, improving access to services including health facilities, increasing recycling, reducing the District's carbon footprint by at least 25 per cent by 2013 and by 60 per cent in total, increasing affordable housing by at least 100 units a year and helping improve the conditions of roads and pavements.

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

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## Ambition

- 31** The Council performs adequately in this area. The Council has a clear, challenging, shared and well understood set of ambitions that display a strong sense of place. But the Council's visioning work recognises the city is not currently meeting the needs of all residents and a lack of consensus exists around how best to deliver sustainable development while preserving the green belt and St Albans historic environment. Community leadership at a senior level is good and strengthening but varies widely at ward level. Overall, engagement with BME communities, hard to reach groups and non-users lacks rigour and consistency. Partnership working is inconsistent. The Council listens to and involves its partners but tensions at a senior level with the County Council restrict full and effective joint working. Challenging targets underpin ambitions and align well with the Council's priorities and the sustainable community strategy.
- 32** The sustainable community strategy presents a particularly strong sense of place which is distinctive and fitting to the context of St Albans. It has three overarching priorities and 15 areas of work, which research, data and public opinion clearly underpin. An LSP partner leads on each of ten areas; the LSP executive body taking the lead in five areas to meet identified gaps in provision. However, what the sustainable community strategy seeks to achieve by 2021 is less clear, and action plans to get there are largely restricted to a three-year period. The LSP recognises it has more work to do to fully integrate and share data that individual partners have, as well as make this more publicly available. It has plans in place to do this as part of the two yearly refresh of the sustainable community strategy. Having a clear and comprehensive set of long-term outcomes is key to developing shared and integrated plans to ensure desired outcomes get delivered.
- 33** Ambitions are clear, well understood and founded on local and national need. The Corporate Plan and linked strategies such as those to address affordable housing, homelessness, waste management and climate change provide a thorough, integrated set of aims and plans that task the Council to match the performance of the better performing councils. Partners, the public, staff and councillors understand the vision. Ambitions adequately reflect the economic, social and environmental needs of the District. Current visioning work seeks to establish a consensus around how best to reduce disparities across the District and deliver sustainable development while preserving the green belt and St Albans historic environment.

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

- 34** Partnership working is inconsistent. Partnerships tasked to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour and homelessness are effective but others, such as the Health, Housing and Social Care partnership, are less so. Some partnership working with the County Council, such as over waste management and with others partners, such as the police on community safety and private contractors on leisure, is successful. But progress on the Pathfinder approach with the County Council and other local councils, a national initiative to deliver seamless services, remains at an early stage. The main issues of resident concern, road and pavement repairs, traffic congestion and activities for teenagers require effective joint working with the County Council which is not always evident. For example, differences of opinion and a lack of joined up working over paving the high street in St Albans caused much ill-feeling and resulted in a high maintenance, costly to clean surface. Consistent, effective partnership working with all partners is necessary to meet residents' needs in a cost effective way.
- 35** A satisfactory and improving understanding of the problems and opportunities faced by the communities in St Albans underpin Council ambitions. Stakeholders report this is the case and IPSOS MORI research results confirm it. Good local evidence, for example, to narrow health inequalities, tackle traffic congestion and improve access to services, underpin LSP and Council corporate and service planning. Partners share information through a shared database and use ward profiling to some effect. Examples being scrutiny reviews and to develop an economic development report for the District. The Council's visioning work will take this a stage further, clarifying more precisely what the future shape of St Albans will be and what long-term outcomes residents can expect. This helps focus efforts and resources, for example, on regeneration and development of the Local Development Framework, to tackle local issues that require long-term planning to deliver.
- 36** The Council ambitions for the area are challenging and realistic with stretching and increasingly outcome focused targets. The Council's ambitions to deliver accessible services, address climate change, reduce inequalities, and create a lasting and sustainable vision for St Albans are demanding and achievable. For example, its challenging targets to reduce the District's carbon emissions by 60 per cent and address and balance long-standing tensions between development, and preservation of the green belt and St Albans historic environment. Adequate alignment of priorities, resource allocation and performance management help drive delivery. Combined with strong senior political and managerial leadership, good financial management, some sound partnership working, good self-awareness and a steady record of delivery gives confidence its ambitions are achievable.
- 37** The Council provides strong and effective leadership to see necessary change through. The Leader and Chief Executive provide clear direction and support to the LSP and the cultural change programme taking place within the Council. This has helped move the LSP away from a talking shop to start pooling resources and collectively address important issues such as reducing inequalities, tackling climate change, and improving facilities for young adults. The leadership provides impetus, sometimes in the face of significant political or public protest, for example, over introducing the new management structure and the twin bins refuse and recycling scheme. They have worked hard to ensure partners co-operate. This gives partners increasing confidence the Council could maintain its driving force for change.

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

- 38** Not all councillors provide effective community leadership. Overt engagement and leadership on local issues by councillors varies widely. Stakeholders report varying experience of councillors championing local concerns. The 'front-line' councillors' community leadership role is not explicit or reinforced by tailored development plans. This leaves some residents feeling the Council is remote, insufficiently and inconsistently championing issues relevant to them and overly engaged on 'city issues'. The Council has signed up to the IDeA led Member Development Charter to help address this and enable elected councillors to feel more engaged.
- 39** The Council listens to and involves its partners and consults and engages well with the business community and many local communities. It uses the results to develop its ambitions and act on local priorities, for example its deprivation work in Sopwell. It needs to do more to engage with non-users and hard to reach groups and its parish councils. There are many examples of good service specific consultation and engagement, notably in housing, leisure; and over specific issues such as regeneration and Verulamium Park. In the latter young people's views led to the park's masterplan proposals including wi fi and climbing walls. Stakeholders mostly report the Council listens and acts on what it hears, in areas such as park maintenance, allocating community grants and the BME community access to housing services. A new parish forum seeks to improve relations with parish councils. A new equalities officer, better targeted and co-ordinated consultation, annual resident surveys, a refreshed community panel, and more community participation in equality impact assessments seek to improve engagement with BME and vulnerable communities. Good engagement with all partners enables communities to be heard and helps shape services to meet their diverse needs.

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### Prioritisation

- 40** The Council is performing well in this area. It has clear and robust priorities shared across partners and understood by councillors, staff and residents. Priorities reflect the local needs of most communities if not all minority ethnic groups. Challenging, largely outcome focused targets drive the improvement process. Sound strategies are in place to deliver Council priorities, which link well with budgets and use of its assets. Partners, service users and staff contribute well to action planning. Overall the Council knows what is important to most local people and uses this well to focus and co-ordinate action to improve outcomes for local people.
- 41** A clear and challenging set of priorities underpin the ambitions for the area. Robust, focused and adequately outcome led action plans underpin each priority. With few exceptions targets seek to match the performance levels of the best Councils. Priorities link across the sustainable community strategy local area agreement, corporate plan, service and financial plans. For example, targets to increase recycling to 50 per cent, lower carbon emissions by 60 per cent and increase affordable housing by 100 units each year. The 2008/11 corporate plan, project plans for each corporate objective and the Consolidated Action Plan (consolidates feedback from external assessments and audits) pull together what the Council seeks to achieve. This makes it easy to track what priorities are, how they will be delivered and what will result.

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

- 42 Council priorities are cross-cutting and balance national requirements, the administration's manifesto commitments and local need. For example, its commitment and targets to reduce health inequalities, tackle crime and improve and extend activities for young people, are all local and national issues. This results in a high-level, tailored plan for St Albans rather than a set of priorities that could apply anywhere.
- 43 Priorities continuously and appropriately evolve to reflect the findings of needs assessment. For example, a Primary Care Trust (PCT) Public Health Report in 2006 and following scrutiny review showed pockets of relatively deprived neighbourhoods in the District which led to the shared priority to reduce inequalities. This led the LSP to form Sopwell Community Partnership and a project to reduce inequalities led by the Leader of the Council. Improved community transport, extended outreach work to older people, an Asian women's support group and the 'onside' football programme followed local decision making on how best to address the gaps in provision. The corporate plan in 2008/11 has less focus on homelessness and more on affordable housing and reducing inequalities in target wards. Continuous review and revision of priorities ensures emerging needs get considered and built into the Council's action plans.
- 44 The Council targets resources effectively, both assets and money, to deliver its priorities. It has made continued use of its capital programme, for example the £2 million investment at Centarus Square, Frogmore, to keep impetus on affordable housing delivering on average 100 units a year. The Council has a satisfactory financial strategy to help deliver its priorities. Budget consultation informs priorities and budget decisions such as the investment in new and revamped leisure facilities, the customer service centre and cycle paths.
- 45 The Council identifies and reviews its lesser priorities. It makes clear what its lesser priorities are and why; and keeps these under regular review. For example, high employment and wage levels and strong incentives, such as high educational attainment, attract new employers, which means that economic development is a recognised lesser priority. The Council seeks to develop sustainable communities and use economic development to help reduce inequalities and is using its City Visioning to revisit whether it needs to target more resource to economic development. Clear identification and review of lesser priorities helps target resources effectively.
- 46 Good partnership working by the LSP enables partners to ensure their efforts add value, and their plans are fit for purpose and achievable. The main partners in St Albans' LSP have a good understanding of the overall priorities for partnership working and the way in which they need to work together to deliver them. With a good lead from the Council they identified strategic gaps in the area that no partner was fully addressing. These were reducing inequalities, improving community participation and volunteering, activities for young people, reducing the impact on the environment, and supporting the community and voluntary sector to provide preventative and support services. Some good joint working and action planning now addresses these issues; this includes some limited pooling of resources. The approach makes good use of measures to track progress and gauge impact, although some baseline work and target setting requires completion.

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

- 47 The Council and the LSP board keep their priorities and objectives alive by regularly and robustly identifying emerging issues relevant to the area. This led to the new set of Council corporate priorities following the May 2008 elections. Recent work by the LSP management committee identified use of community buildings, transport in areas of deprivation and the need for the improved decision making and use of joint assets as warranting further work by the LSP. This ensures emerging local needs help shape and drive priorities; actions and use of resources.
- 48 The Council co-ordinates its aims and plans well to ensure they are robust and deliverable. For example, its programme of linked actions to improve access to services. This includes updating the Council's information and communications technology (ICT), developing a customer contact centre, corporate website, arrangements for corporate payments, home and mobile working, developing an integrated approach enforcement and business process re-engineering arrangements around the projects. Project management and plans for transforming customer services are comprehensive and supported by councillors and managers. Strategies to deliver affordable housing, reduce homelessness, improve scrutiny, and performance management are equally vigorous. Taking an integrated approach to action planning increases the possibility that desired outcomes get delivered.
- 49 The Council takes difficult decisions to ensure improvements keep on track. For example, creating a Chief Executive post and new management structure in the face of political opposition. Another was a publicly controversial decision to begin alternate weekly collections for refuse and recycling. This shows the Council takes difficult decisions to modernise, realign or extend service delivery.
- 50 Many Council services actively encourage and engage users of services and residents well to shape and monitor service delivery. Leisure, housing and environmental services engage well locally to identify and meet needs; partner organisations recognise and value this. The Council uses a wide range of consultation mechanisms and forums to engage local communities and those at risk of disadvantage and provide feedback on the action taken on their comments. But active engagement with BME communities and hard to reach groups is not comprehensive. A revised equalities work plan, improved representation on the LSP board, a refreshed Community Panel, and annual and better targeted surveys seek to address this.
- 51 Robust action to deliver priorities is inconsistent. Delivery against the corporate plan milestones is good, and the Council mostly takes timely corrective action to good effect to deliver its priorities. Its good trend of improvement, residents' satisfaction with services and with St Albans as a place to live and some positive external inspection and assessment report findings, show this is so. Partnership working to cut crime and anti-social behaviour, recycling and leisure activities is making good progress. Targeted action to reduce homelessness, reduce use of hostel accommodation, improve planning, and secure Gershon efficiencies has been effective. However, corrective action is not always timely as shown by the delayed delivery of the Core Strategy of the LDF and the lengthy time taken to complete job evaluation. Focused, integrated action planning requires strong performance management to ensure targets and desired outcomes get delivered.

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

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## Capacity

- 52** The Council performs adequately in this area. It is well led. Staff are competent, well trained, and committed; morale is high and sickness low. But many staff feel unduly pressurised and a lack of capacity in some key areas such as planning services and finance hinders progress. Financial management and procurement is sound, risk and staff management adequate. Decision making arrangements are clear and effective, and are supported by good leadership and some effective and improving scrutiny. Partnership working is inconsistent and the Council is not yet getting the best from this. The Council is well led but community championing of local issues by councillors varies widely. Senior management capacity is much improved; and a more enabling management culture is being embedded. The Council understands its capacity pressures and responds effectively; it has the means to improve but must deliver its medium term budget plans to be sure of doing so.
- 53** The Council is well led. The Leader and the Chief Executive work productively together, to provide ambitious political and managerial leadership, for example to the LSP. Staff and partners recognise and value this lead. Portfolio holders are knowledgeable and work openly and transparently with partners in shaping strategies, plans and priorities. The organisation's previous overly controlling and risk adverse style of managing is changing for the better but the enabling culture and new ways of working are not embedded. The senior management team is capable; visible and improved leadership and management capacity is having a positive impact such as in leisure and planning services. Clear leadership provides focus, reinforces priorities and motivates others to achieve.
- 54** The Council has adequate arrangements in place to train and support councillors. The Council provides an array of training opportunities, is working towards achievement of the Member Development Charter, and has introduced a councillor buddy system and a new induction programme. However, while it has plans in place to enhance the role of councillors as community leaders, this remains work in progress; which means community championing by councillors remains inconsistent.

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

- 55** The Council has clear, well-documented decision making processes and structures and an open approach to communication. Councillors and staff are clear about their roles and responsibilities and relations are good. The scheme of delegation, forward plan and corporate strategies clearly set out various roles and reinforce timely decision making. Decision-making links well to corporate and strategic priorities and there are few instances where councillors are micro managing. Governance arrangements are sound and standards of behaviour enforced. Parish councils receive excellent and valued support on standards issues. Regular web-cast planning meetings seek to inform residents. This provides a firm basis for consistent, transparent decision making.
- 56** Scrutiny aids service improvement and has sound plans in train to make it robust. The new scrutiny arrangements, founded on internal learning and best practice, are progressing well. This includes separating internal and external facing scrutiny, and providing detailed annual reports on progress. Work programmes tie in well with corporate priorities and emerging local issues such as special expenses and youth provision. The scrutiny committees focus on results and seek an inclusive approach to their reviews. In depth, rigorous scrutiny of targeted issues takes place, such as those for dealing with deprivation in the District. The scrutiny committees review and learn from their work and uses this to change the way they run, for example, overt tracking of their recommendations. But, scrutiny's new ways of working are still embedding. This means scrutiny does not fully appraise or report its impact on services for local people.
- 57** The Council can successfully partner to deliver improved outcomes and value for money but this is inconsistent. The September 2008 Audit Commission Partnership report shows variable impact from the Council's partnerships on health, housing, social care and environment. It works well with a wide range of external organisations including the voluntary and community sector to deliver joint initiatives and services. For example, its homelessness, community safety and waste management work. The Council recognises the need to make all its partnerships accountable and ensure it manages them effectively, for example, all those supporting the LSP projects. It has recently strengthened the means and internal capacity to do this. Levering the best from its partnerships could help the Council cost effectively meet local need.
- 58** The Council has a sound, medium term financial strategy linking resources to deliver its priorities but faces budget and reserves challenges which leave it with minimum cover for contingencies. Finances are well managed and sound, benefit from a ten-year revenue budgeting, and are targeted to deliver ambitions such as improved leisure facilities. Reserves are adequate. Good planning budgets for future costs of key issues such as job evaluation and the expected increased cost of more planning enquiries. Assets support priorities such as affordable housing. However, budget cuts and demands for more services efficiencies present a real challenge to a lean organisation with pressured staff. Much rests on the business improvement programme to help it balance its budgets in the medium term while ensuring adequate resources to sustain improvement.

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

- 59 The Council delivers good value for money (VFM), secures significant cashable efficiency savings well above Gershon targets and targets underperforming services, such as housing management, for detailed review. Councillors and managers have a strong commitment to deliver and improve value for money. VFM is one of the priorities in the corporate plan. Work with external consultants to thoroughly benchmark and cost services seeks to ensure real efficiencies result from its business process re-engineering work. Delivering improved VFM helps free up resources to use for existing and emerging priorities.
- 60 The Council manages its business risks adequately. Risk strategies and registers are in place but are used inconsistently. For example, overt management of risk is ingrained at the Chief Executive's Board but handling risk lacks consistent consideration in service planning and integration with performance management. Full information, including consistent and considered use of risk data is necessary to underpin robust decision-making across all services.
- 61 Procurement meets requirements and delivers improved VFM through a series of contracted out services. Good procurement secured a £300,000 yearly saving on the waste contract, better quality service and resident satisfaction on the leisure contract and more resilient and flexible systems from the IT contract. Capacity building with the voluntary and community sector is embedding a needed and more rigorous means to assign, check and gauge the impact of grants. But a lack of a procurement manager has slowed progress embedding the Council's sound procurement strategy. For example, developing activity based costing, a precondition for exploring the benefits of shared services and developing Pathfinder working with other Hertfordshire authorities. Sound procurement increases the Council's capacity to act on local needs and priorities.
- 62 A good approach to workforce planning and people management results in a capable, representative and committed workforce. The workforce profile is reflective of the local community. A comprehensive human resources strategy and workforce plan links well to priorities and enables managers to manage. Staff have good access to and make good use of training. The Chief Executive's Board and middle managers are making best use of the management competencies to improve their skills in community engagement, service redesign and communication. Thus, staff are committed, enthusiastic, responsive and capable, with good morale and below average sickness absence. Staff are able to try new ways of working but are not consistently encouraged or supported to do this across all services. Staff are mostly positive about their line managers, although their experience of being managed varies widely.
- 63 Staff capacity is stretched and has hindered the Council improving as quickly as it would have liked. Many staff feel pressured. Staff turnover is high (15.8 per cent 2007/08 including agency staff), there is a high reliance on interim posts and agency staff, and recruitment to permanent posts is slow. A lack of capacity has seriously delayed work on the Local Development Framework and improving certain financial aspects of its use of resources. The Council is looking at sharing staff in key areas like building control, planning, policy review in Human Resources (HR) and sharing training with partners but has not yet taken any fundamental decisions about shared services.

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

- 64 The Council uses information and communications technology (ICT) and e-government adequately to deliver its priorities and provide greater choice and an improving service for users. The customer service centre provides a responsive, good quality, expanding and highly regarded e-enabled one-stop shop. Handheld and tablet computers support home and field working in revenues and benefits and planning services. However, there are a few areas where ICT is not keeping pace with changing need; for example, the web-site is not fully transactional and necessary improvements to data capture and sharing with partners is work in progress. Good use of ICT helps make staff and services more efficient and services accessible.
- 65 The Council's approach to equalities is adequate but not strategic. It is not sufficiently integrated with service planning and performance management. For example, equalities is not mainstreamed consistently into service plans, there is not an overarching approach to engagement and consultation with BME and vulnerable groups and equalities training for both councillors and officers is in urgent need of refreshing. Use of equality impact statements do not systematically or consistently lead to differentiated services to meet diverse needs in the community. BME communities believe the Council has been complacent because of the relative racial harmony in St Albans. To address this, a new equalities officer was appointed in July 2008. A dedicated programme of work is in place to improve consultation and engagement, embed equality impact assessment and attain and move beyond level 3 of the Local Government Equality Standard. Until the Council has achieved this level of the standard it will not be systematically differentiating services where required in order to meet diverse needs in the community.

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### Performance management

- 66 The Council performs adequately in this area. Performance monitoring and reporting is thorough, informative, much improved and recently integrated with financial reporting. Performance management secures above average best value performance indicator (BVPI) performance and good value for money services. But the rigour and consistency of managing performance varies across the Council and its partnerships. Timely corrective action is not always taken to keep priorities on track and tackle all areas of under-performance. Internal best practice is not routinely shared internally or with partners. Needs based service planning is not embedded. The Council is yet to integrate the ways it manages performance into a coherent improvement framework that delivers consistently and uniformly 'excelling' services.

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

- 67 The Council's performance framework is thorough, well considered but inconsistently applied. It provides a staged, outcome focused, improvement led framework for action and a good system to track and highlight under-performance. A tailored hierarchy of reports ensures councillors and officers are involved at the right intervals and level consistent with their role. Reports are clear, easy to follow and provide trend and comparative data, and track delivery against target. This has secured good BVPI performance since 2003, and significant improvement in some priority areas such as planning, recycling, leisure and homelessness. However, service planning, handling of equality impact assessments and benchmarking vary widely across services. The Council is self-aware and has a well reasoned plan in place to take its management of performance to a higher level. A vigorous and consistently applied framework provides a firm foundation on which to drive improvement.
- 68 Responsibilities for managing performance are clear and mostly well understood at all levels, this provides a clear sense of direction and clear accountability for delivery to staff. Action plans align and cascade through the community strategy, corporate plan, service plans and individual appraisals. Senior staff and councillors all play their part in holding themselves and services to account for performance. But underperformance in some areas such as urgent housing repairs, handling of invoices, and speed of response to Ombudsman complaints lacks timely corrective action. Clarity of expectation for managing and performing helps focus staff energy and efforts.
- 69 The Council and its partners regularly review their progress but do not have a comprehensive picture of how well one another are achieving against planned outcomes. The LSP has produced no overall, written, annual report of progress against its objectives and targets since 2005. An annual DVD highlights progress against the five core projects but no full analysis of results against outcomes took place in 2007/08. The LSP projects groups give regular reports to the LSP board and management committee but updates from the partnerships have been erratic. This restricts partners and residents' ability to challenge the LSP progress against its intent. Good work is underway to ensure partnerships can and do measure the success of their work and the impact of the sustainable community strategy.
- 70 Managers do not hold all staff to account for their performance in a timely way. Good structures and policies to manage individuals' performance exist but are not consistently deployed across services. For example, appraisal focuses more on setting objectives and identifying training needs, rather than assessing and improving individual or team performance. This loses opportunities to explore and address the causes of underperformance and hinders delivery of the 'excelling' services the Council seeks.
- 71 Target setting for BVPI is challenging but makes inadequate use of benchmarking, and an overt target setting policy to tailor targets to drive improvement in line with Council priorities. The vision of excellence for some services lacks precision. Matching what the best twenty five per cent of councils achieve is an implied rather an overt policy. It is not clear which services the Council does not seek to excel in, or which it inspires to be market leaders. This hinders consideration of redistributing resources away from lesser priorities or services performing beyond Council requirements. A lack of tailored target setting means that despite good delivery against targets the Council's overall comparative performance is not improving.

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

- 72** The VFM of services remains good and arrangements for improving VFM remain adequate. The Council has robust methods for delivering efficiency savings through its annual budget process and business improvement programme but has little understanding of its services' unit costs. Overt consideration of VFM does not feature much in annual service plans. Overall, benchmarking lacks rigour and consistent application and tracks rather than drives performance improvement. Integrated improvement methods are necessary to ensure the Council manages and improves the value for money it delivers.
- 73** The Council uses knowledge effectively from complaints, customer contact and customer feedback to drive improvement within services. The complaints process is clear, well publicised and easy to use. Good tracking and use of complaints and customer feedback helps shape service delivery and drive improvement. Recent examples include improved design of penalty charge notices and more home visits by the benefits service. Resident satisfaction with complaints handling is excellent. Staff have embedded learning from contact with residents as opposed just to complaints. This has brought many benefits to residents such as the CSC booking highways faults direct rather than referring residents to the County Council. Systematic complaints and contact management improves services in ways that matter to local people.
- 74** The Council does not make best use of internal best practice to drive improvement. It learns from external challenge and uses this to shape its action planning and improvement priorities. Its use of peer assessments, external inspections and its involvement of external agencies clearly show this. It has collated this feedback into a consolidated action plan to ensure it keeps focus on its improvement objectives and addresses all issues raised in a timely and comprehensive manner. Nevertheless, it misses opportunities to transfer learning internally, for example from its high performing and external award-winning services. Consistent, systematic sharing of learning and good practice helps drive improvement.
- 75** The Council does not know how well it is performing against its customer care standards. Corporate service standards are clear and show customers what they can expect when they access services. Clearly documented standards are well promoted by the customer services centre (CSC), posters, the web-site and through staff training. However, the standards remain in draft pending resident consultation and the means to track performance against them remains work in progress. This prevents a rigorous assessment of how well residents are being treated as customers.
- 76** An overly risk averse approach to managing hinders staff flexibility to meet service needs and provide excellent customer service. Some risk averseness still remains in the organisation, which means that some staff feel constrained about improving residents' experience of services. The Chief Executive has launched a programme of managerial and cultural change. A 'want to do' culture is embedding and helps drive staff to improve services. But this culture is not consistently rooted. Managers do not consistently make best use of staff talent to drive service improvement.
- 77** The Council communicates its performance clearly, accurately and transparently so residents can see how well it is performing against its priorities. For example, performance against planned outcomes is set out simply in the corporate plan, and highlighted in plain English in its Council magazine.

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# What has been achieved?

## Achievement and improvement

- 78** The Council is performing well in this area. It has delivered good, if not always uniform, performance against its priorities. Many of these achievements have been delivered through good partnership working, such as reducing crime in the District, delivering high levels of recycling and high quality parks. Resident satisfaction is good and improving. The rate of improvement against best value performance indicators (PIs) is above average since the last corporate assessment resulting in the Council being one of the top ten improving councils in 2005/06, although latest figures for 2007/08 show a below average improvement rate. Focused, targeted action has delivered strong improvement in planning, priority homeless and recycling.
- 79** Residents are highly satisfied with the Council overall, and with several services and the area as a place to live. The IPSOS MORI survey in 2006/07 showed that 84 per cent of residents were satisfied with the area as a place to live; the highest in Hertfordshire. BVPI satisfaction indicators, over the last three years, and satisfaction with the Council overall has remained well above average. Satisfaction with complaints handling, museums, galleries, theatres and concert halls, parks and open spaces is high, matching the level of the best 25 per cent of councils. However, 2006/07 data shows tenant satisfaction and satisfaction with waste collection, cleanliness of public space and recycling to be below average level.
- 80** The Council has sustained a strong, well above average service performance. Over 60 per cent of BVPI have been above average since the last corporate assessment. In 2006/07, 44 per cent of indicators were in the best performing 25 per cent, compared to the national average for district councils of 33 per cent. A low percentage of BVPI (only eight per cent in 2006/07 and 2005/06) were among the worst performing 25 per cent of councils. The rate of improvement in BVPI is average between 2004/05 and 2006/07; although the latest data for 2007/08 shows this has slipped to a below average improvement trend and an increasing percentage of BVPI below the median.
- 81** The Council has worked well with partners to deliver some high and improving services in a cost effective way. For example, its work with a private contractor to run its leisure centres has delivered savings, increased investment in them and extended and improved access to services. Partnership working to improve community safety was criticised in the Audit Commission's 2004 CPA report but is now an area of strength; crime reduction targets are met or exceeded and residents now see crime as less of an issue.

## What has been achieved?

- 82** Service performance is not uniformly strong or consistent. For example, while overall for 2007/08 the Council has a high percentage of BVPI among the best 25 per cent of councils, only seven per cent of environmental BVPI and 21 per cent housing services BVPI performed at a similar level. The average time to process new housing benefit claims is among the best in the country; in contrast the time taken to process changes of circumstances in 2007/08 fell to below average and now takes longer than it did in 2004. Average re-let times for council housing has slipped steadily since 2003/04 to 2006/07 from an excellent to a below average performance. However, targeted action to remodel and redevelop the sheltered housing stock led to an improvement in performance for 2007/08.
- 83** The Council's capacity to improve, based on its track record and capacity building plans, is adequate and improving. Clear ambitions and focused priorities shape and lead the achievement of outcomes. However, weaknesses in performance management hinder the Council's ability to deliver all of its priorities and become the 'excelling' council it seeks to be.
- 84** Achievements delivered against the Council's five corporate aims are set out below.

### To build a community that is open, fair and inclusive

- 85** The Council is successfully making services more accessible. In 2007/08 the Council introduced web-casting of its planning meetings. This has been a popular innovation. For example, 1,170 people logged on to watch the planning inspectorate inquiry into a proposed rail freight depot in Park Street. This has now been extended to cover other Council meetings. A customer access point at Harpenden Town Council makes it easier for residents to deal with their housing, planning and Council Tax queries, access a BT internet kiosk and link with other Council services. Access to services for residents is improving.
- 86** The CSC provides a timely, responsive, accessible, good quality and a rapidly expanding range of front-line services. Residents report the customer service centre is excellent, and its multi-skilled staff are helpful and give an impression of a caring Council. This was confirmed by an Audit Commission Access to Services inspection in 2008, which identified that staff were helpful, knowledgeable and responsive. User experience of the Customer Service Centre is good, in July 2008, 99 per cent of users were very satisfied with the service they had received. This means residents and users have easier access to more consistent services.
- 87** The Council works effectively with voluntary groups to deliver improved outcomes for specific access needs. For example, the Council is working in partnership with the Citizen's Advice Bureau, which has representatives in the Customer Service centre each Thursday. Shelter holds drop-in centres for homelessness advice in the centre each Tuesday. Together they provide a broad range of information and referral services to customers. The voluntary sector is enhancing the capacity of the Council to provide targeted customer services.

- 88** Outcomes for diverse groups within the community have improved. For example, the Council has increased outreach work for benefits customers. The LSP work in Sopwell ward has delivered several outcomes including women only swim times for Asian women, and enabling elderly residents to benefit from Tai Chi, subsidised health services and a community minibus. The Council has also funded a disability sports officer, who delivers sport and lifelong learning opportunities for people with disabilities with activities such as Boccia. In 2008, the Council improved Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) compliance to 95 per cent for public access to its buildings and re-appraised its equality standard for local government from level 3 to 2.
- 89** The Council provides below average services for some vulnerable people. For example, in 2007/08 the percentage of urgent housing repairs completed in time, the average length of stay in hostel accommodation and tenant satisfaction with housing services (2006/07) are all below average.
- 90** The Council's web site has significant limitations but the site is improving from a low base. The Society of Information Technology Managers (SOCITM) evaluates the current web site as standard and not fully transactional. Navigation of the web site is not intuitive, and does not follow the local government framework. Information on accessibility is incomplete. The Council redesigned and improved navigation in October 2008. This is part of its plans to improve residents' access to services by presenting information its services in a way that is meaningful to the public.

### To work in partnership for the health and well being of the community

- 91** The Council has made some good progress by working in partnership to deliver on its health and well being aim. This has included a free Leisure Card which offers residents' discounts on leisure activities, 11,500 residents currently have a card, which equates to 8.4 per cent of the population. CCTV has been introduced at St Albans Cathedral, Cell Barnes shops and George Street shops in partnership with local organisations and business. The Council won Local Authority of the Year at the Responsible Drinks Retailing Award 2007 for their proactive work in tackling irresponsible drinks retailing, through Taxi Marshalls, Pubwatch and Offwatch.
- 92** Sports and leisure facilities are good and improving. The Council's joint Sports Development Team with its external leisure provider achieved a score of 82 per cent in 2007/08 (Highly Commended), one of the highest in the country, on the UK Quality Scheme for Sport and Leisure. Satisfaction with leisure facilities has improved significantly from a poor 47 per cent in 2003/04 to a still below average 55 per cent in 2006/07. The leisure management contract has delivered significant savings and improved facilities such as the renovated Harpenden Leisure Centre. Other examples of the Council's good work in this area are:
- the Onside St Albans football project with Watford Football Club and other partners to tackle anti-social behaviour in six of the District's most deprived wards;
  - the summer play ranger programme across the District's green spaces;
  - the outreach scheme for children unable to access mainstream holiday activities. The scheme attracted over 2,600 children and young people to 54 sessions across ten sites in the District in 2007;

## What has been achieved?

- free swimming for children under five years old since 2006. The scheme has been developed further in 2008 to provide free swimming for all school children during school holidays; and
  - over 20,000 people visited the outdoor ice rink at Westminster Lodge during the 2007/08 festive period. The rink, a joint initiative with partners, was provided at no cost to the Council.
- 93** Good partnership working is helping to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour. The Council established a business crime reduction partnership in October 2006 working with Hertfordshire Constabulary and local businesses in both St Albans and Harpenden. This partnership won two national 'Action Against Business Crime' awards in February 2007. In addition it implemented designated anti-social drinking zones in St Albans City Centre, Harpenden Town Centre and Clarence Park to control anti-social drinking in public places in conjunction with the transfer of alcohol licensing powers to local authorities. St Albans has seen a significant drop in crime over the last four years. For example: between 2003/04 and 2007/08 overall crime reduced by 22 per cent, burglary dropped by 25 per cent, car crime by 44 per cent and assault by 27 per cent. With its partners the Council helped 1,153 children from 25 schools in the District learn how to reduce the risk of being a victim of crime.
- 94** The Council is taking practical steps to help reduce health inequalities in St Albans. On average, there is 6.2 years gap in life expectancy between people living in the most affluent and least affluent wards in the District. To combat health inequalities the Council through the LSP helped gain external funding to support neighbourhood learning, develop outreach work with elderly residents and provide subsidised health services in Sopwell. Partners and service users praise the initiatives and the benefits delivered such as improved health and well-being of older people. The 'Shakelt' young people's project produced a video to promote the results of this work. This highlighted, for example, the establishment of the Asian Women's group, provision of Tai Chi, and Chiropody for older people and work with young people to address teenage issues like underage drinking. However, it is too early to gauge the full extent of this work or the benefits deriving from improved relations with the primary care trust on reducing health inequalities in the District.
- 95** Good work with the community and voluntary sector (CVS) supports the well-being of the community. For example, the Council's work with Shelter and the Citizen's Advice Bureau to provide weekly advice facilities through the CSC. A service level agreement with the CVS allows them to provide a grants advice service and administer and monitor the Council's grants process. This has enabled a more focused and value for money use of grants to support the delivery of Council priorities.

### To cherish and promote heritage, arts and culture

- 96** Residents appreciate the good work the Council does to cherish and promote heritage, arts and culture. Culture BVPI are consistently among the best performing councils in the country. Investment has been directed at key projects to support the arts and the District well promoted as a venue for visitors through Council organised events, such as the St Albans Festival which attracted over 31,500 people in 2008 and Summer Sounds in Rothamsted Park which was attended by 6,000 young people. Annual Resident's First weekends attract over 9,000 people at over 40 venues. This good work is widening public access to the arts.
- 97** Satisfaction with and use of St Albans museums is high. Both resident satisfaction with and use of museums is among the best performing councils. St Albans museums have the highest schools attendance of English district council museums with 30,178 school children visiting the two museums in 2007/08. With the aid of Heritage Lottery Funding (HLF) 10,000 museum images have been digitised. Online visitors have increased from 61,974 in 2006/07 to 87,992 in 2007/08. School outreach sessions have increased from five in 2002/03 to 60 sessions in 2007/08 reaching 1,777 children. The Council has also launched a diversity project to include heritage of ethnic minorities in museums provision. This is making museum and heritage collections more accessible.
- 98** The Council works well to enhance and promote St Albans history. It completed the Hypocaust building to cover the Roman Mosaic in Verulamium Park and received a commendation award for its work. An image database provides online access to museums collections. The museums service has received a £50,000 HLF award for interpretative work on the Roman town in Verulamium Park, working with local schools, community offenders, and the University of Hertfordshire. This helps keep St Albans on the historic tourism map.
- 99** The Council has widened and improved public access to the Arts. Events include the first annual St Albans Festival (Summer 2008) which was attended by an estimated 31,500 people over a two-week period; and in partnership with the Harpenden youth council, the Council organised a Summer Sounds Youth Music gig in Rothamsted Park which was attended by 6,000 young people in 2008. The Council took the Maltings Arts Theatre back into in-house management in 2006/07, and implemented a new business plan to develop the programme to attract a wider audience, including young people and provide a better value service. This has paid off, with improved year on year takings from £85,218 in 2005/06 to £114,750 in 2007/08 and more usage.

### To safeguard the environment

- 100** The Council is successfully reducing its impact on the environment. Its Eco House in Smallford has been pioneering the use of energy efficient technologies in the Council's housing stock and recently won a Green Apple Award for Environmental Best Practice. In 2007/08 a further 18 houses from the Council's stock were refurbished using the same principles leading to a 55 per cent reduction in residents heating bills. Window replacement and kitchen/bathroom replacement schemes in the Council housing stock during 2007/08 have achieved 90 per cent recycling on windows removed and 69 per cent on kitchen/bathroom fittings removed as part of the contract. The Council's energy use has reduced 6.8 per cent from its 2004 baseline. Work, with its partners, to reduce carbon emissions by 60 per cent by 2025 is on track.

## What has been achieved?

- 101** Performance on recycling and composting has consistently improved over the last three years. Good promotion of recycling in schools and direct to residents has sustained above average recycling and composting performance to 2007/08. Recycling rates and the amount of waste collected per person have remained better than average since 2004/05. However, satisfaction levels with recycling and waste collection remain just below average, as is the provision of kerbside recycling collection. Collection costs rose to above average in 2007/08. In 2008 the Council introduced a twin bin recycling system. Since this introduction recycling performance in the first three months of 2008/09 (according to unaudited data) has improved to 48.03 per cent. The new recycling and refuse collection contract provides savings of £300,000 each year from 2009.
- 102** St Albans' streets are clean and rubbish and litter lying around is not a problem for residents. Street cleanliness is above average both for litter and graffiti and a comparably low percentage of residents (37) feel litter lying around is a problem. The Council also removed 100 per cent of fly-tips within five working days in 2007/08. In contrast visible fly-posting in 2007/08 was high and resident satisfaction with the cleanliness of public spaces is below average. A new graffiti and fly posting vehicle, a joint road clearance and maintenance scheme with the county and cleaner district campaigns seek to keep the District clean. Clean streets help make the District a more desirable place to live, work and visit.
- 103** While planning performance has significantly improved in recent years, planning's contribution to safeguarding the environment remains inconsistent. The Council does respond to strong local opinion on planning applications (as with the rail freight depot at Park Street) and will challenge property owners to keep their properties tidy and improve the area. No Brownfield site land is derelict and a high percentage (93.5 per cent in 2007/08) of new homes get built on previously developed land. It ceased to be a Standards Authority in 2006. Despite having one of the highest planning application rates in the country and insufficient planning officers, by 2007/08, planning applications were being speedily processed; well above government targets. However, in 2007/08 there were an above average percentage of planning appeals, which questions the quality of decision making; and much to the Council's concern the local development scheme milestones were missed. Satisfaction of applicants with the planning service in 2006/07 was poor.

### To ensure the District is a desirable place in which to live, learn, work and visit

- 104** The Council meets its own affordable housing targets but does not deliver sufficient affordable housing units to meet assessed need. It works well with registered social landlords and provides partnership funding to support affordable housing units, such as the £2.6 million for 107 units on the City Station site, and the £390,000 for 14 additional units at the Park Street site. It has a policy to deliver 35 per cent affordable housing on larger developments and has adopted the lower threshold of 15 dwellings or half a hectare for seeking affordable housing. Council assets such as garage sites are used to provide affordable units, like at its Castle Project to provide nine units for disabled young people in the District. The Council received £4.9 million in 2008 to deliver 182 units as part of the National Affordable Housing Programme. Expected completions for the next three years run at 105, 166 and 94 units; but this is well below the assessed need of 800 units per year. A Quality of Life Strategy for older people seeks to improve choice across all tenures and the quality of social rented accommodation. Adequate affordable housing is vital to sustain the social and economic well being of the District.
- 105** The homelessness service provides a good, improving service. Its 2007 temporary accommodation client survey shows high satisfaction with the quality of accommodation and staff. The number of homeless acceptances reduced between 2003 and 2007 from 169 to 135. The number of cases where homelessness was prevented rose from 35 in 2005 to 149 in 2007/08. Actions have included a crash pad and mediation scheme for young homeless people, a rent deposit scheme which helped to house 38 homeless applicants and a supported accommodation scheme for young people in partnership with Aldwyck Housing Association. Work with the County Council secured funding to provide better support services for 20 homeless people by Martins Trust. In March 2008, the Council and its partners gained £525,000 from the Places for Change Programme to improve services and education and training to rough sleepers. The average stay in hostel accommodation has reduced from a poor 33 days in 2005/06 to four days in 2007/08.
- 106** Residents and visitors to St Albans benefit from well-maintained parks and open spaces are of good quality. Resident satisfaction at 89 per cent is high. Three parks have Green Flag status. The Council has introduced Park Rangers and Friends Groups in Clarence, Rothamsted and Verulamium Parks and volunteer Tree Wardens to help enhance its green spaces. It has received a £50,000 project planning grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, and has worked with community and statutory group representatives to develop a plan to improve Verulamium Park. Good quality, accessible parks support the Council's drive to reduce health inequalities and make it a more attractive place to live and visit.
- 107** St Albans desirability as a place in which to live, learn, work and visit is recognised by others. Its attractiveness as a city in which to invest is highlighted in a national survey, carried out by the Centre for International Competitiveness at the University of Wales Institute in Cardiff. This lists St Albans as the second most competitive city in Britain. The survey looked at features including significant new developments, exports, business start up rates and the number of graduates in cities, towns and urban areas. This supports the Council's low priority given to economic development in recent years.

## What has been achieved?

- 108** The Council's management of its housing stock delivers an inconsistent performance. BVPI data for 2007/08 shows, for example, above average energy efficiency ratings for council houses, rent collection and spend on planned maintenance. However, the average re-let time for Council housing has steadily lengthened from a quick 25 days in 2003/04 to a slower 30 days in 2007/08. Repair work is slower than average. Inconsistent delivery feeds through into tenants' satisfaction with Council housing, which along with opportunities to participate was below average in 2006/07.

# 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 St Albans City and District Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 13 October to 17 October 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.

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# The Audit Commission

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