

Service Inspection Report

June 2006



Environment Inspection

Rossendale 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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Service Inspection

This inspection has been carried out by the Audit Commission under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999 and is in line with the Audit Commission's strategic regulation principles. These principles embody the objectives of our Strategic Plan and Strategic Regulation. They also reflect the principles from *The Government's Policy on Inspection of Public Services (July 2003)*.

Audit Commission service inspections should:

- focus on public service outcomes from a user perspective;
- act as a catalyst to help inspected bodies improve their performance;
- concentrate inspection work where it will have most impact, so that it is proportionate and based on an assessment of risk;
- be based on a rigorous assessment of costs and benefits, with a concern for achieving value for money both by the inspected organisation and within the inspection regime itself;
- be, and be seen to be, independent of the inspected organisation;
- report in public, using impartial evidence to inform the public about the performance of public services so as to enhance accountability;
- involve collaborative working with other inspectorates and external review agencies to achieve greater coordination and a more holistic approach to the assessment of performance by audited and inspected bodies;
- share learning to create a common understanding of performance that encourages rigorous self assessment and better understanding of their performance by inspected organisations;
- be carried out objectively by skilled and experienced people to high standards and using relevant evidence, transparent criteria, and open review processes; and
- enable continuous learning so that inspections can become increasingly effective and efficient.

We assess services using published key lines of enquiry (KLOE) to inform our judgements. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's web site at www.audit-commission.gov.uk.

This report is issued in accordance with the Audit Commission's duty under Section 13 of the 1999 Act.

Summary

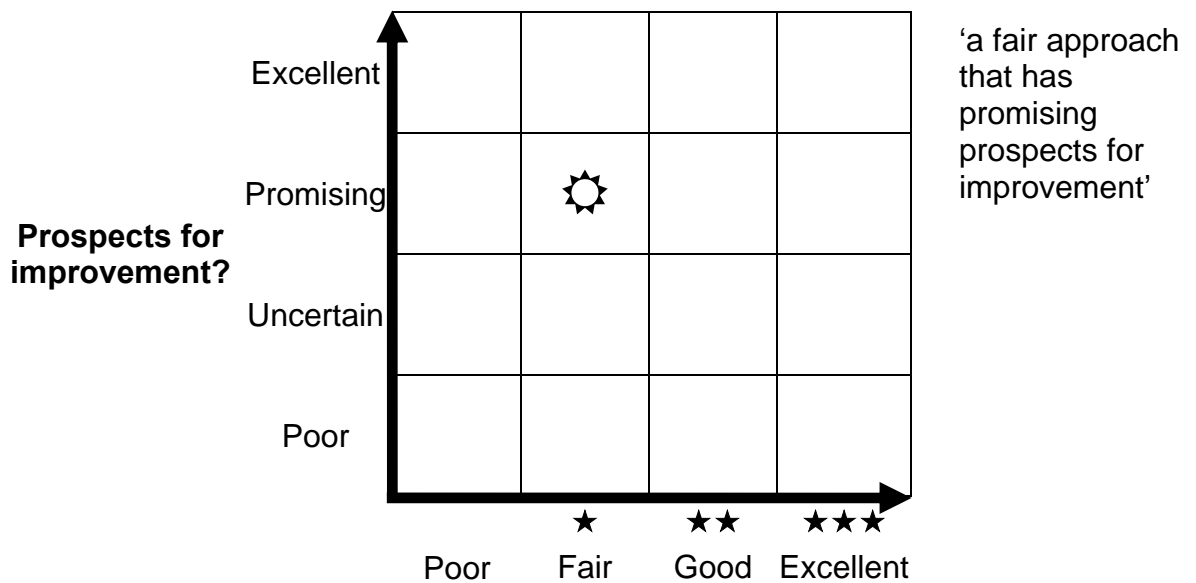
- 1 Environment is what defines Rossendale and makes it unique. The narrow urban valley of the Irwell, running between harsh Pennine uplands, is what shapes the borough's character and set it apart from other Lancashire districts.
- 2 The borough's topography is both a constraint – especially the limited scope for large industrial sites and for expanding transport corridors – and an opportunity. Everyone lives close to the countryside, and there is a strong sense that residents' quality of life is bound up with the landscape and with the heritage urban streetscape that has escaped wholesale alteration.
- 3 The Council recognises that it has rich environmental assets, and rightly makes managing the environment a high priority. Some imaginative and exciting ideas are emerging, aided by an unusually self-reliant and entrepreneurial community voice. The latest community-led project, the Adrenaline Gateway, will bring cultural, environmental and economic benefits through regenerating a former quarry as a regional extreme sports venue.
- 4 The Council has managed the environment as a cultural asset for some time, and has achieved outcomes such as the Irwell sculpture trail and refurbished play areas. However, at present much of the Council's strategic thinking about the management of environmental assets in other areas is at the concept stage. In sectors such as economic development, tourism and health, policy is being researched or formulated now, and monitoring the impact of environmental policies on the borough's diverse communities is at an early stage of development. Transport access and health, for example, are issues with an environmental aspect that show significant variation within the borough.
- 5 In the last three years the Council has worked hard with partners to deliver better services and has given greater prominence to understanding what matters to local people. Consulting the community and managing communications and PR, along with improvements in basic environmental services such as street cleansing and refuse collection, are beginning to turn round the Council's reputation, previously poor, with the public.
- 6 Internally, the Council is moving from the role of provider of services to facilitator and commissioner, in order to maximise capacity and improve value for money. It is also adept at using partnerships to multiply the resources available to it, and makes extensive use of consultants to provide expertise in important areas such as planning policy and environmental health. In several areas of service delivery it outsources provision or works in partnership with external organisations; the next area for review is street scene and liveability (SS&L), where the aim is to secure a preferred partner by the end of February 2007.

- 7 The Council's structures and processes are beginning to support its new role and to make service provision more cost-effective. For example the creation of integrated neighbourhood environmental action teams to deal with a wide range of formerly separate streetscene services has been a popular move with residents and has resulted in a better maintained urban environment. The redesign of waste collection rounds and purchase of new vehicles will shortly raise efficiency in this service. Corporate systems are also being redesigned to support services better, and technology such as geographic information systems is poised to improve service planning.
- 8 Performance in environmental services shows steady improvement, and overall most best value performance indicators are grouped around the national average, though performance levels in some services such as street cleanliness are still below national averages. Staff are energised by the changes, and morale and performance management are improving. Sickness absence, however, though lower, remains an area the Council needs to focus on.
- 9 The Council has thus put in place the building blocks of effective policy and service delivery, though several are still at an early stage and will not bring benefits for some time. We therefore assess the present approach as **fair**, with **promising** prospects for improvement.

Scoring the approach

- 10 We have assessed Rossendale Borough Council as having a **fair**, one-star approach to environmental services that has **promising** prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Table 1 Scoring chart¹



A good approach?

Source: Audit Commission

- 11 The council's approach to environmental services is fair. It is steadily developing policy and performance in managing its environmental assets, but still has some way to go.
- The Council is improving communication with customers, within which it has produced and promoted environmental service standards, fostered the role of the community network and opened a one-stop shop.
 - It has also adopted a more proactive approach to managing press and public reaction, for example to play area closures.

¹ The scoring chart displays performance in two dimensions. The horizontal axis shows how good the service or function is now, on a scale ranging from no stars for a service that is poor (at the left-hand end) to three stars for an excellent service (right-hand end). The vertical axis shows the improvement prospects of the service, also on a four-point scale.

8 Environment Inspection | Scoring the approach

- The Council is tackling environmental issues such as litter, graffiti and waste collection that matter to local people. Recycling and quantities of waste collected compare well with other authorities.
- The Council is involved in a number of projects that improve open spaces and encourage people to use them. It also works with local organisations on education to enhance understanding and care of the environment - for example its schools programme and the voluntary group Civic Pride.
- Sickness absence has fallen and is now being actively managed, though it remains a financial drain on services.

However:

- there is significant diversity across the borough in factors such as income, health and transport access, but the Council is not systematically monitoring these variations or the differential take-up of environmental services, or using the information to tailor services;
- the Council's engagement with communities, and its relations with partners, is only slowly overcoming negative public perceptions. Consequently public satisfaction is still low;
- some environmental services such as environmental health are still comparatively weak, though they show an improving trend. Others, such as enforcement, are in the course of development but have not had time to show results;
- the council recognises it needs to set an example in the responsible management of its own waste and energy, and has introduced some changes such as the use of recycled paper, but its action plan as yet lacks firm dates or targets and most changes are small; and
- the council has yet to state what value it puts on the quality of its landscape and built environment and has few tools to assess value for money in debates about environment issues.

12 The approach has **promising** prospects for improvement because:

- current environmental policies are challenging and take account of local, national and regional issues;
- the Council is assembling a solid statistical base for policy-making - such as the recent open spaces review and ongoing conservation area character assessments - and uses consultation and citizens' panel surveys to inform policies;
- the Council and its partners recognise that the borough's cultural and economic future is bound up with the environment, and corporate policies give priority to the management of environmental assets;
- funding decisions reflect this priority, and streetscene and liveability services are included among the priorities for spending in 2006-07;

- the Council is filling in gaps in major plans to consolidate this vision, for example the local development framework, economic development strategy, tourism, health and asset management plans;
- the Council now involves a wide range of partners and stakeholders in shaping environmental policy and plays an active part in regional and subregional strategic groups;
- reorganisation - such as the introduction of NEAT teams - is making a difference both to service delivery and to rapport with the public;
- an SS&L service review has led to the introduction of quality management practices incorporating a more customer-oriented approach to service delivery, and better value for money through redesigned refuse collection and cleansing rounds, vehicle replacements and litter collection methods;
- as a result, there is a steady improvement in performance in environmental services such as recycling and street cleanliness. There is also an improvement in the quality of the natural environment, open spaces and the built environment;
- residents are beginning to recognise a difference in services. Public satisfaction with environmental services, and with the neighbourhood as a place to live improved strongly from 2003 to 2005;
- the Council pursues alternative means of service delivery to improve performance. It has a positive approach to working in partnership and is playing a more active role in several of its existing partnerships. It is resourceful about getting added value from partnerships to extend management capacity and augment resources. Partners are positive about the new spirit of collaboration;
- it is currently seeking an external partnership to deliver modernised and improved SS&L services;
- staff morale and efficiency have risen with the introduction of quality management systems, good HR practices and better communications; and
- corporate improvement of 'tools for the job' such as IT, GIS and the one-stop shop supports service improvement.

Not all building blocks are in place.

- The Council has not yet clearly defined its vision, which would give a focus to environmental policy as well as defining its image and marketing priorities.
- Councillors need to develop further their strategic drive and leadership role.
- In some key areas where the Council wants to develop its community leadership role - including economic development, tourism and health - it is still developing policies and strategies.
- The corporate procurement policy commits the council to sustainable environmental principles but contains no mechanisms for putting them into practice, and action so far has been confined to basic office practice such as the use of recycled paper.

10 Environment Inspection | Scoring the approach

- Some improvements in environmental services are too recent to affect performance measures or are still in the pipeline. More efficient cleansing routing and frequency were introduced in April 2006; the purchase of new refuse vehicles to improve reliability is under way and sickness absence is being more closely managed. Some restructuring of services such as environmental health are expected to make a significant impact on performance during the coming year.
- The pace of change puts staff and systems under strain, and staff feel the need for a breathing space to absorb new information and allow collaborative networks to form.
- Vacancies and high staff turnover in some areas could shortly affect development and regeneration project plans.

Recommendations

- 13 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, councils need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the council. In addition we identify the approximate costs² and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context we recommend that the council do the following.

Recommendation

R1 Build on the organisational review to develop a coordinated approach to the management of the borough's environmental assets. Bring together strands of environmentally-related services such as street scene and liveability, planning, housing and cultural services, and define what that will mean for users.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- all partners and residents will know what the borough will be like if aims are fulfilled;
- the resulting clarity of purpose will enable the Council to exercise more influence in regional matters;
- a coherent picture of what difference the Council is making;
- a basis for prioritising environmental actions; and
- the Council can compare the cost-effectiveness of actions that flow from the policy, gradually improving efficiency.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs.

Recommendation

R2 Get a fuller understanding of variations in people's needs and the differences in take-up of services within the borough, so that all sectors of the community benefit from the co-ordinated management of the borough's environmental assets.(paragraphs 36, 37)

² Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 percent and high cost is over 5 per cent.

12 Environment Inspection | Recommendations

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- a greater understanding of the pattern of need across the borough, to guide the provision of services and make them accessible to all; and
- a greater understanding of differential take-up of services, to guide the removal of obstacles to people's enjoyment of the borough's environmental assets.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs.

Report

Context

The locality

- 14 Rossendale is one of the smallest Lancashire districts, with a slowly rising population of just under 66,000. It covers 138 sq km between the conurbations of West Yorkshire and Greater Manchester; a band of urban development runs East-West along the deeply incised upper valley of the River Irwell, flanked by harsh Pennine moorland scattered with isolated settlements.
- 15 Centuries of sheep farming on the enclosed moorland gave way in the Industrial Revolution to textile mills, which in turn have been converted to footwear manufacture or other uses. A string of former mill towns – Bacup, Rawtenstall, Haslingden - runs east-west along the narrow valley floor, the western end being connected to the motorway network via the M66.
- 16 Eighty eight per cent of the borough is green space and a quarter is green belt land. It is an area of high landscape and recreational value and there are several programmes to enhance the cultural aspects of the natural environment, such as the East Lancashire Regional Park, Irwell sculpture trail and the planned Halo - one of a series of twenty first century landmarks being built as a regeneration and arts project by the East Lancashire Environmental Arts Network.
- 17 The borough also offers excellent opportunities for active leisure. The Mary Towneley loop of the Pennine Bridleway is used by walkers, mountain bikers and horse riders, and there are facilities for water sports and skiing in the borough, together with an annual motor bike show. A new sports hall to be used by the community has just opened at a school in central Rawtenstall.
- 18 Rossendale's built environment is characterised by the remains of its industrial heritage – there are over 260 listed buildings and eight conservation areas. Stone-built terraced housing constructed before 1919 forms a third of the housing in the borough; it is visually harmonious, and the Council has cleaned some terraces to their original creamy colour, but almost a quarter of these houses are unfit and many are occupied by low-income or elderly residents.
- 19 On the index of multiple deprivation, Rossendale ranks 92nd among English councils³, between its neighbours Calderdale (86th) and Bury (97th). Aspects of deprivation such as crime and employment show few extremes, but there is a high degree of health deprivation in the borough – 20 per cent of super output areas (SOAs) are among the worst 10 per cent in the country.

³ The ranking runs from 1 (the highest deprivation) to 354. The borough is divided into 44 super output areas (SOAs), with approximately 3-4 SOAs making up a ward.

- 20 Manufacturing, though a shadow of its former strength, still employs a quarter of the borough's workforce. Unemployment within Rossendale is low, and the economic activity rate, at 80 per cent, is well above regional and national averages. However, wage rates within the borough are low. People who work in the borough earn a median weekly wage of £289, well below both regional and national averages. By contrast, people who live in the borough (half of whom commute out of the borough to work, mainly in Greater Manchester) earn £360, higher than regional and national averages. This gap between the wages of residents and employees is the largest in Lancashire, and together with health and housing statistics points to a more general diversity among social and economic groups in the borough.

The Council

- 21 The Council has 36 Councillors representing 14 wards. The political majority changed in 2004, and 23 councillors are now Conservative, 10 Labour, 2 Liberal Democrat and 1 independent. A cabinet-style executive governs the business of the council, and two overview and scrutiny committees cover performance and policy. The Council's net revenue budget is estimated at approximately £10 million in 2006-07, with the greatest share going to environmental services.
- 22 Following unfavourable corporate assessments, the Council is required to report progress on its corporate improvement plan to an Improvement Board led by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. As part of its recovery plan, it has restructured most departments and is in the process of overhauling existing plans and processes and designing new ones to address areas of weakness. Its recent progress assessment report⁴ described it as having made 'good progress in the past year'.
- 23 The Council enjoys a high profile in the borough; 78 per cent of a survey sample in 2005 could name it as responsible for local services in their area, and the majority correctly identify which services it is responsible for. The proportion saying they were very or fairly satisfied with the way the Council runs things was 61 per cent, compared with 21 per cent who were fairly or very dissatisfied. However, the proportion of people saying that the Council now runs things better than it did three years ago was 15 per cent, against 25 per cent who said it runs things worse⁵.

Managing environmental assets

- 24 This inspection a newly revised inspection methodology and has a broad scope. It assesses the council's approach to managing its environmental assets, covering a range of services that have an impact on the natural and built environment, including street scene and liveability, elements of planning, housing, economic development and cultural services.

⁴ Audit Commission: Progress Assessment Report, March 2006

⁵ Beacon Research, General Residents' Satisfaction Survey, November 2005

It concentrates on the management of the environment as a cultural asset - bringing colour and richness to people's lives, contributing to the image of the borough externally and to residents' quality of life internally - and as an economic asset - supporting the development of the leisure and creative industries and tourism.

- 25** Most environmental services have been subject to recent change, or, like the environmental health service, are undergoing change now. The main directorate within the Council that deals with environmental services is Streetscene and Liveability directorate (SS&L), formed following an organisational review to bring together a number of environmentally-related services. The Council is seeking to run the directorate in partnership with an external company, and is at present formulating an invitation to tender with the aim of beginning the new arrangement in approximately a year's time.

How good is the approach?

What does environmental management aim to achieve?

- 26** Many people live in Rossendale because of its environment. Public surveys⁶ repeatedly stress the natural environment as the most important factor in the quality of life in the borough. The Council, conscious of the value of this most vulnerable asset, promises to maintain and enhance it for local people.
- 27** The importance of the environment in Rossendale is reflected in the community strategy. Under the overall banner 'Rossendale Alive', it groups actions under eight themes:
- community network;
 - better housing;
 - health and wellbeing;
 - education and lifelong learning;
 - economy;
 - culture;
 - environment; and
 - community safety.
- 28** Within these themes are aims for using and managing the borough's environmental assets.
- The environment theme aims to create a high-quality street scene that 85 per cent of residents and visitors will be satisfied with. It proposes action to tackle litter and vandalism, clean up derelict and neglected land and protect the natural environment.
 - The culture theme has twin aims of engaging 70 per cent of residents in physical activity and of making the borough attractive to visitors. Among the actions supporting these aims are marketing and promoting heritage and improving open spaces and play areas.
 - The economy theme makes specific mention of the Adrenaline Centre as a regional attraction, and promotes town centre regeneration.
- 29** A number of sectoral strategies support the community strategy, providing a link to the Council's services. These strategies are linked in turn to regional and national policy, for example Lancashire's regional spatial strategy.

⁶ Such as public consultation for the cultural strategy and local development framework

- 30 Environmental management services are spread amongst a number of council departments, including planning, housing and cultural services as well as the main street scene and liveability services (SS&L). The current business plan for SS&L is built round 14 'key challenges', including wider use of education and enforcement and extending area-based street scene teams to all neighbourhoods.
- 31 The importance the borough gives to the environment is in line with regional and national policies that emphasise physical activity, landscape value, accessible countryside and sustainable development.

Is the approach meeting the needs of the local community and users?

- 32 The Council acknowledges that it has previously put little store by communicating with the residents it serves, and it has worked in isolation. That has all changed, and the Council now takes great care to consult local people while developing policy, and if possible involve them in its design - so much so that some commentators now talk of consultation overload. The customer service strategy 'incorporates improvement plans and standards that will ensure we have systems that collect comprehensive customer information that will inform our future decisions'.
- 33 Current corporate priorities reflect local people's priorities, and the environment is a corporate priority because surveys repeatedly cite it as the main factor that contributes to quality of life in the borough. Rossendale residents show strong concerns about their environment. They commonly mention problems with graffiti, litter & rubbish (but not abandoned cars). Road and pavement repairs and clean streets top the list of things people most feel need improving in the borough.
- 34 The stewardship of environmental assets is important to people, and it often forms the basis of policy and practice. The recent open spaces audit for example begins by declaring that 'open green space is a vital part of Rossendale' before going on to list the Council's aims for its maintenance and development. The planning service conducts sustainability appraisals and environmental assessments as part of the planning framework.
- 35 In general the borough has access to comprehensive statistics on which to base policy, but in some topics, the Council is still gathering and processing data that will give it a better understanding of its customers and what their needs are.

Diversity

- 36 Overall, services have not taken into account variation in need within the borough. For example, there are wide differences in health status, with a six-year gap in life expectancy between the best and worst areas. Environmental health staff link the poor health profile in Rossendale (paragraph 1919) with housing and income, fuel poverty and smoking rates, but more work is needed to get a fuller picture.

- 37 There is a related lack of information about differential take-up of services. The Council cannot show that all residents are able to take advantage of the borough's environmental assets, though participation by Rossendale people in active outdoor leisure activities is not as high as in other parts of the county⁷.
- 38 Within these limits, the Council is beginning to respond to differing needs - it is adapting refuse collection methods for the most rural settlements and the neighbourhood environmental action (NEAT) team is looking at the appropriateness of wheeled bins for houses without gardens, and in some instances changing to communal recycling. In 2003 the Countryside Agency commissioned a survey of social exclusion in rural communities in the borough⁸, and the next LSP assembly will concentrate specifically on the impact of the community strategy on older people.

Community engagement

- 39 The Council's engagement with local communities is good. Its aim is to involve them as fully as possible, and the next paragraph lists some of the actions it is taking. In the management of the environment such an approach works well because local people generally feel strongly about their environment.
- 40 At all levels of engagement, environmental services are now communicating more readily with residents.
- Information - The Rossendale Alive newsletter contains a high proportion of articles which are environment related, helping residents to help themselves. Public relations awareness is now much higher; for example, the council has a well planned strategy for communicating the changes in refuse collection from 1 April. Press coverage of activity involving the council has become much more positive.
 - Access - face-to-face access poses problems for residents of outlying hamlets, and for environmental services reaching householders, but for those who can visit Rawtenstall, the Council has opened a one-stop shop (paragraph 86) that will shortly deal with the full range of environmentally related services.
 - Consultation - The Council has considerably expanded consultation with residents. One outcome is that public opinion can change policy; for example consultation with residents about the area action plan for Bacup, Stacksteads and Britannia showed that most were opposed to the draft plan's proposal to demolish some terraced housing and rehousing the affected communities. The Council has therefore adopted a conservation-led approach that emphasises the refurbishment of terraced and back-to-back housing.
 - Participation - users have been involved in designing some recreation projects; for example local residents for the proposed Adrenaline centre, young people in the design of a multi-use games area and teen shelter in Stacksteads. This policy ensures that such facilities are well used and little vandalised.

⁷ Feedback group for ELEVATE: Living and Working in East Lancashire, May 2005

⁸ Countryside Agency, ROAR (Rural Opportunities Across Rossendale), 2003

- Engagement - There is no community engagement strategy at present, but the community network, with a consultant, is drawing one up. The community network, articulate and ambitious, has been a success and the Council would like it to be more involved in service delivery. Other channels such as area forums and the Lancashire Local (the county's area forum), are not seen as correspondingly successful, and the Council is debating their future.
- 41 There are now published standards for some aspects of environmental services - notably sweeping frequencies for street cleansing - and they are available on the Council's website. However, information about standards in some other services (for example, how quickly fly tipping is cleared away) is lacking.

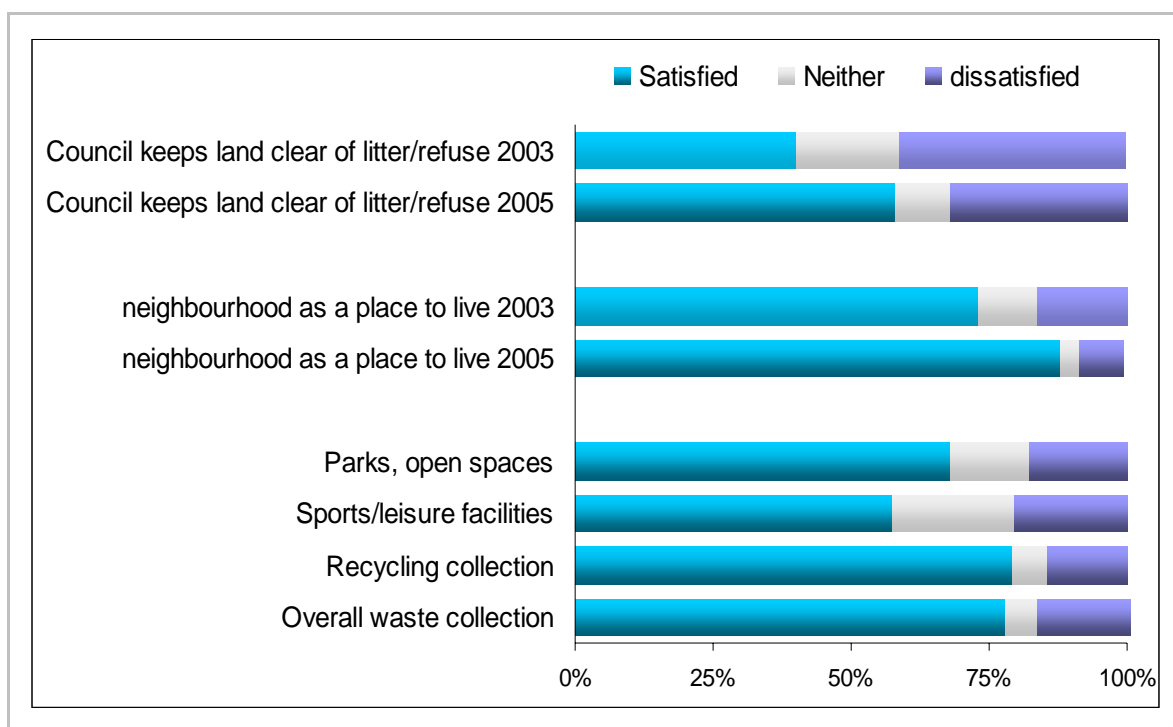
Service outcomes

- 42 At a strategic level, the Council's management of the environment as a cultural asset (paragraph 24) results in a good quality of life for both residents and visitors. For other themes in the community plan (paragraph 277), it is meeting basic operational standards but is still in the process of formulating strategies to manage its environmental assets.
- In environment, it is currently achieving an average quality of street scene. In 2004-05, performance on recycling and new homes on brownfield land was at the national average. Performance on cleanliness was slightly below average, and on kerbside collection of recyclables, was slightly above average. In 2005, SS&L undertook a fundamental review of environmental services; the external consultants carrying out the review found inadequacies in the quality of equipment and the vehicle fleet, negligible use of technology for operational management and a lack of procedures for staff, leading to an ineffective cleansing regime. The Council has acted on the review's recommendations; it has tackled litter and related problems, and is collaborating with partners such as Groundwork and local businesses to clean up the River Irwell corridor. However, there is still some way to go to meet all targets.
 - In culture, it has refurbished several open spaces and play areas and they are now well used. The Council works with Groundwork, Civic Pride and other organisations on projects such as cleaning up of the river banks in the Valley and development of multi-user games areas across the borough. Its open space review covers all aspects of green open space from allotments through to cemeteries and sports pitches in a comprehensive manner, preparatory to writing a comprehensive plan for managing them. The links from the environment through physical activity to health are still being researched.
 - In economy, the management of the environment as an economic asset is still at the concept stage. There is no economic development strategy yet, but an understanding of what needs doing, and an increasing emphasis on putting Rossendale on the map and using the environment to promote the borough - so for example it is first off in the National Jogathon on the 30 April. Meanwhile, an area action plan for Rawtenstall town centre emphasises the town's role as the main retail centre for the borough and the potential for further development of leisure facilities.

- 43 The council is following national guidance and objectives, together with a number of regional and county strategies in developing its work. It is well on schedule in developing the new local development framework, for example, and incorporates policies from the new regional spatial strategy.
- 44 Improvements in environmental management are beginning to have an effect on public opinion, though reputation has not yet caught up with performance. The figure below shows results from survey of residents' satisfaction with the Council and its services in 2005, a repeat of one carried out in 2003. Anecdotal evidence supports the statistics; ward councillors for instance are noting a reduction in complaints to them following the introduction of the NEAT teams.

Figure 1 Public satisfaction

Satisfaction rates with the Council overall and with some environmental services



Source: Beacon Research, General Residents' Survey 2005

Is the approach delivering value for money?

- 45 The Council is committed to sustainable use of its environmental assets to further its cultural, economic and environmental aims. However, it has few tools to assess whether it is doing so cost-effectively. In many cases, it is still in the process of defining what outcomes it wants. It is too early to define, for example, what part the outdoor environment should play in the promotion of the borough, and the Council is yet to address the 'value' of the landscape.

- 46 The only comparative costs readily available are those for component services. The Council uses the medium-term financial strategy to look in detail at the costs of its services in comparison with the average for districts. By this method it has brought waste collection costs down from over 40 per cent higher than the district average in 2003-04 to 3 per cent higher in 2004-05. Street cleansing and litter is also close to the average. The costs of the planning and environmental health services and of sport and recreation are below district averages. The cost of the parks and open spaces service rose significantly to 67 per cent above average, but public satisfaction with parks and open spaces was recently measured at 68 per cent, 10 per cent higher than two years previously. The Council links the high cost to the large number of open spaces in the borough; its recent open spaces review (paragraph 42) is the first step towards a management plan.
- 47 Though environment is a high priority and the Council is committed to funding improved environmental services, increased value for money is also necessary if the growth is to continue. SS&L has begun a process of systematic improvement to waste collection and street cleansing services such as a programme of vehicle replacement and updating the collection rounds. Service improvements are supported by developments in corporate 'tools for the job', such as a common address base, updated financial systems and an asset register. However, some value for money improvements are awaiting a better knowledge of baseline figures, and sickness absence, although 15 per cent lower than last year, remains a financial drain on the service.
- 48 The Council has become resourceful about using partnerships, consultancies and agreements with voluntary organisations to gain added value. For example, it is using volunteers from the local Civic Trust to complete heritage character assessments, and it is using a planning policy consultant to train planning policy staff on the job.
- 49 Finally, the Council's new procurement strategy mentions the need for environmentally sound procurement, and it includes a performance indicator on the percentage of the Council's spending that is with local companies. However, the procurement action plan does not develop this theme, and there is no guidance for directorates on how procurement is to be made environmentally sound. In practice, most emphasis goes at present on cutting costs. There is, however, an internal sustainability plan, agreed in June 2005 which has achieved some successes with more paper being recycled and staff reducing paper usage and increasing the recycling of office waste.

Summary

- 50 In summary, the Council's management of its environmental assets is **fair**. It has an established approach to managing the environment as a cultural asset, though less experience at present in exploiting the economic potential of the environment. Operationally it is tackling environmental issues such as litter, graffiti and waste collection that matter to local people, but the cleanliness of the streets is still below average, though improving. The Council does not monitor the diversity of people's needs, or the differential take-up of services.

What are the prospects for improvement?

What is the track record in delivering improvement?

- 51 Environmental services have shown over the past three years that they are capable of transformation, and front-line services have progressively improved. The broader picture of how the Council wants to manage the environment is still under construction; elements of its approach to the environment are in place, but have not yet come together into a coordinated vision. This pace of change is not without its problems; the volume of change puts staff and systems under strain, and in some areas there has been only patchy improvement, or new arrangements are still to be introduced. Nevertheless, there is good evidence that the Council will sustain its ambitious agenda.
- 52 Corporately, the Council has built a track record of delivering major change projects quickly and effectively. It has also changed its approach to managing environmental assets. It has viewed the environment as a cultural and leisure asset for some time, and has actively worked on programmes such as the Irwell sculpture trail (with neighbouring councils) and renewal of play spaces. It has now started to think about the environment as an economic asset - not only the quality of the landscape and the urban street scene in attracting businesses and visitors, but development of the outdoors as a business sector in its own right. This change has implications for a range of services, and the Council is defining new sectoral strategies with implications for environmental management, such as promotion and marketing, economic development, tourism and health.
- 53 Over the past three years it has increasingly involved stakeholders much more in policy-making, and is now seeking ways of involving voluntary and community organisations more in service delivery. It is also more conscious of the need to influence the opinions of residents, visitors and regional decision-makers, and has initiated a comprehensive marketing and brand study. Promoting the borough is a priority in the 2006-07 budget.
- 54 Streetscene services underwent a fundamental service review in 2005, which identified flaws in the management and operation of the service. The 2004 best value inspection of waste management recommended that SS&L publish and promote service standards.
- 55 The overhaul of the environmental health service is a good example of what has been achieved as a result. A year ago the service was reactive and even its work on basic statutory duties had gaps. There was little evidence about the quantity or quality of its work or of how costs were related to quality. Now it has mapped out its strategic direction and introduced basic performance measures, has secured a half post in health promotion as part of a restructure, and is preparing a policy about the Council's role in health. It is more proactive and customer-focused, and over the next year plans to get a more precise picture of health across the borough so as to target activity more effectively.

It is too early to see the results reflected in performance indicators, and current performance is still well below the national average (the service scores 36 per cent on a checklist of best practice, against a national average of 85 per cent). Other recommendations from the review - such as cleansing routing - are still to be implemented.

56 Underpinning the strategic and process changes is firmer administration and better value for money. For example:

- SS&L is managing sickness absence more actively. As a result, absence has dropped by 15 per cent this year;
- it has improved service provision through better communications with the SS&L workforce and a greater understanding of service standards (particularly Encams cleanliness standards, where training is currently underway);
- it has tightened up statutory services; for example, numbers of food premises inspections are now almost on target, after having been neglected in the recent past;
- it is stepping up enforcement action for environmental transgressions. It now issues fixed penalty notices for dog fouling and serves notice on private landowners for tipping on private land, but is yet to carry out prosecutions or issue fixed penalty notices for littering;
- it is buying new refuse collection vehicles. Though a high capital cost, the increased reliability, appearance and performance make the expenditure cost-effective. For example, the new vehicle serving farms and outlying communities replaces a smaller one that needed emptying many times. The business case shows it will pay for itself within a year; and
- new technology is increasing cost-effectiveness. For example, the number of bin collections that are missed has dropped substantially over the last year because tracking equipment on refuse collection vehicles allows customers and managers to locate them accurately (see paragraph 85). A future plan to give residents real-time information via the Council's website is expected to bring further efficiency gains through a reduced number of calls about missed bins to the Council's contact centre.

Impact on the public

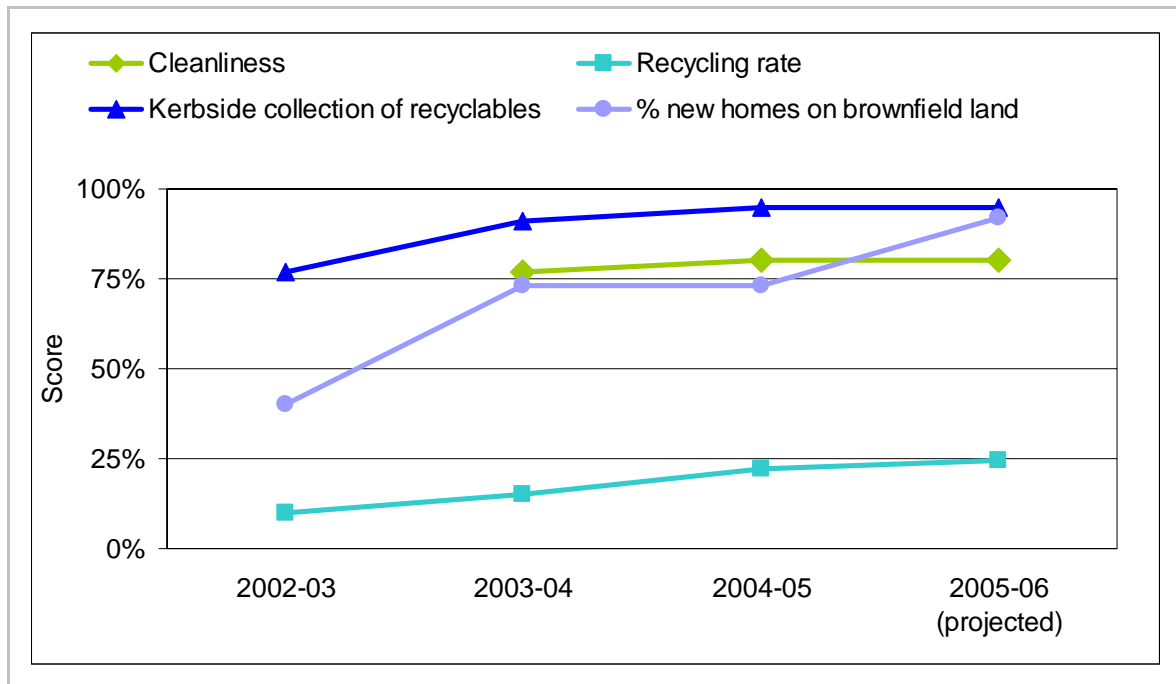
57 Residents and visitors can see steady improvements to the natural and built environments. Through the housing renewal programme ELEVATE, the Council has undertaken face-lifts to 100 stone-built terraced houses, and has brought back an unoccupied former mill, an eyesore to local residents, into use as high-quality apartments. The proportion of unfit houses is slowly falling.

58 These visible improvements are mirrored in improved performance. The most recent annual report on best value performance indicators (BVPIs) shows that corporately, just over half of BVPIs improved in both 2003-04 and 2004-05, and in the first two quarters of 2005-06, 63 per cent were improving, though several are not meeting their targets or have slipped back.

- 59 Services related to the environment reflect the general picture; the amount of waste collected per resident and the cost of collection are both down; the service has significantly improved recycling; it has already exceeded its statutory recycling target and in March 2006 added textiles and cardboard to the list of recyclable materials that it collects. The council has concentrated on rolling out the infrastructure and achieved good recycling levels. It now faces the challenge of raising participation levels.
- 60 The figure below shows the trend in key environmental performance indicators over the last three years and projected figures for 2005-06. They show steadily improving performance, bringing environmental management services up to the national average.

Figure 2 Environmental best value performance indicators

Performance over the last three years on best value indicators related to the environment, with estimates for 2005-06 (2005-06 figures are for the third quarter of the year, to December 2005)



How well does the council manage performance?

- 61 Improvement plans are good and have the potential to take the Council's management of the environment forward. The Council is open to ideas, brings in a range of partners and is moving towards a clearer corporate definition and exploitation of the borough's 'brand', in which the environment is likely to play a significant part.

- 62 Corporately, the Council is not yet in a position where it has a clear vision of what it wants Rossendale to be like (though councillors have done some scenario-building) and therefore has not described the place of the environment in that vision. However, it has set in motion, through the corporate plan and the budget setting process, the means to define where it wants to be. A budget priority for the coming year will be marketing and promotion of the borough.
- 63 Some aspects of environmental policy are clear, well-established and enjoy a general consensus among stakeholders and the public about their importance. One is the management of the environment as a cultural asset; an abundance of programmes and projects, from the Irwell sculpture trail through the refurbishment of play areas and heritage buildings to the planned 'Halo' on a former landfill site in Haslingden⁹, demonstrate the substantial amount of activity, in which the Council is expected to play a leading role. It has recently published an open spaces audit that sets out 'visions' for the maintenance of all types of open green space in the borough, and through maps and descriptions surveys their present distribution and condition. The audit provides a comprehensive base for pinpointing where improvement is required and a framework for the standard to be attained.
- 64 The exploitation of the environment as an economic asset is relatively new. Here the Community Network, through the LSP, has led the way; members of the culture and environment subgroups, building on the cluster of businesses catering for outdoor recreation and the borough's extensive provision of active leisure facilities¹⁰, have proposed an extreme sports centre, to include BMX and mountain bike trails, paragliding and ballooning, on the site of the redundant Lee Mill and Greens Moor quarries in Bacup. The centre would link up with existing adrenaline sports centres across the county in a £70 million single ticketing and marketing enterprise to be known as the Adrenaline Gateway, and would give an economic boost to the area. The proposal is currently the county's bid for Big Lottery and People's Millions funding, and a £80 000 feasibility study is about to be carried out.
- 65 There is no economic development policy, but the Council is clear about the need to continue attracting residents with high-level skills, for whom the quality of the environment is a key factor in settling in the borough. It also aims to keep more of the money generated by residents in the borough; linked to this is the need to create a stronger retail base and an increased number of visitors. Structurally, the LSP is transferring its work in tourism from the cultural to the economic theme group to underline the business need for attracting more visitors to the borough, and the Council has drawn up an area action plan to redevelop Rawtenstall town centre.

⁹ See paragraph 16

¹⁰ See paragraph 17

- 66 An expanding retail sector requires an attractive and welcoming streetscene, and the Council gives priority to improving street cleanliness, tackling dereliction and managing green space. The Council is planning for improved value for money in the streetscene service. For litter bins, for example, it is drawing up a new strategy to provide replacements for the many small bins with no 'brand' identity and needing excessive amounts of emptying. It is also re-engineering refuse collection rounds and revising cleaning routes.
- 67 Economic growth will be dependent on the ability to ensure free movement of traffic through the Valley. However, transport issues have not been fully considered or planned strategically, though major developments are accompanied by traffic impact statements. The Council recognises that it needs to tackle transport issues - addressing traffic volumes, reducing dependency upon the car - but has yet to demonstrate how it will address these issues, or how it will influence other stakeholders, such as Lancashire County Council, the highway authority.
- 68 In summary, future plans show a strong focus on regeneration and the natural and built environment, with particularly imaginative schemes for using the environment to benefit the local economy. Although there are some gaps in major plans - the Local Plan for instance has expired - the Council has put much energy into recent 'catch up' activity to produce baseline data and studies upon which to base the strategies - the open spaces audit described above is an example.

Supporting improvement

- 69 Leadership and vision within the council are rapidly gaining strength. At a corporate level, the Council exercises a leadership role both internally and among partners. Councillors have benefited from a series of training programmes and show an increasing ability to balance the partisan and the strategic in taking difficult decisions - for example in a current controversy about the future of municipal greenhouses in Stubblelee Park. Overall, the Council is shifting its perspective from planning within available budgets to resourcing a strategy, and there is cross party ownership for Council priorities. The overview and scrutiny function however is still developing. There is no clear example of how the overview and scrutiny committees have instigated change or improvement in environmental services.
- 70 Partners say that leadership of environmental services has also improved and is now effective, with a strong drive and determination to succeed. The council is committed to driving the waste agenda forward through strong service leadership. For example, the County Council has committed money for a waste transfer station, and the Council is currently examining the feasibility of allocating land at its depot for this purpose. Environmental services also have a good record of learning from external scrutiny; for example Street Scene and Liveability has implemented the main recommendations of the best value inspection of waste management.

- 71 Action plans in the SS&L business plan are generally SMART, and incorporate specific actions and outcomes, with assigned responsibilities, resources required and timescales. At a more strategic level, performance measurement and reporting are improving, but from a low base. There is now regular reporting on best value performance indicators (BVPIs), and the annual BVPI report for 2004-05 says that the council needs to analyse why it is not meeting some of its own targets - for example for decent homes and processing of major planning applications - and take action. However, the report does not say what action the Council will take or who will take it. More work is needed to embed performance management in environmental services.
- 72 Operationally, the Council has introduced quality management principles into services, reflecting its orientation towards understanding what is important to its customers and adapting service delivery to their needs. For example, the reorganisation of street scene and grounds maintenance into neighbourhood environmental action (NEAT) teams is making a difference both to service outcomes and to public rapport.
- 73 To assist with performance coordination and reporting, the Council corporately has installed the Covalent performance management system. There are only three business plans on it so far, though the Street Scene and Liveability plan is a prototype. The system has already signalled that the new blue bin recycling scheme was not collecting as much waste as planned, and staff have taken action to get collection back on target through extra publicity and encouragement to residents. Future ambitions are to use the system to collate the Council's growing management of risk - much of the improvement plan depends upon efficiency savings within the Streetscene and Liveability services, which account for around two thirds of the Council's total spending on services - and to link the Council's system to the county system for monitoring Local Area Agreements.

Does the Council have the capacity to improve its approach?

- 74 In a short space of time the Council has moved from a poorly-performing and introspective authority to a position where a fair proportion of services are on a par with other councils. It has the necessary capacity to ensure that improvement continues, and as longer-term changes start to take effect, it is moving out of the recovery phase. This section shows how the Council's investment in staff, skills and systems underpins longer-term improvement.
- 75 The Council recognises that it cannot achieve its ambitious plans alone, and uses partnerships - in preference to pursuing external grants - to extend management capacity and multiply the resources available to it. In its approach to partnership it:
- has focused on improving its relationship with local statutory partners, for example the police and the county council, and with the LSP. These partners' view is that the Council has improved immensely over the last few years; its participation in meetings has risen and it is now more forward-looking in attitude, is more responsive and communicates well;

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- actively fosters a wide range of partners - for example it is learning to build on and support the strong community sector and to develop its latent links with local businesses; and
- is reviewing many of its existing partnerships so as to concentrate on the most productive ones, and is raising its profile in regional groupings to which it belongs.

Partners say that the Council cooperates well with them in planning for shared objectives, though its past reputation for isolationism and lack of communication dies hard and sometimes colours partners' view of it.

- 76** The most substantial current application of this principle is the Council's decision to enter a partnership with an external company to procure street scene and liveability services. It used external review to examine street scene services and look at future ways of service provision and concluded that this is the best way to deliver a modernised and improved service to customers. It is currently formulating terms of reference for the procurement of a street scene service and expects to spend £100,000 on the procurement process, some of it on bringing in additional legal and financial expertise. The partnership is proving attractive to the market and the Council has already been approached by a number of contractors; however, the resource implications for the Council of the SS&L partnership have not yet been fully calculated.
- 77** The Council's other key partnership is the local strategic partnership (LSP), which has recently been assessed by GONW as 'amber-green'. The LSP is community-driven and is getting more ambitious as the community network matures in experience and capability. The Council provides a major input to the LSP's environment theme group action plan. Senior officers are members of the environment theme group, ensuring that decisions can be made, aims, objectives and targets signed up to and progress monitored. The Council has proved good at making links across the LSP theme groups, for example connecting health, exercise and the environment through the involvement of SS&L, the Leisure Trust and the PCT.
- 78** One other example of a partnership with far-reaching effects on the use of the environment as an economic asset is the Council's work with Lancashire County Developments Limited, the county council's economic development arm. This joint arrangement brings money and staff into Rossendale's economic development unit, and helps take forward its ambitious plans for regeneration and economic growth, which include redevelopment for Bacup/Stacksteads/Britannia, promotion of the borough to new businesses and assistance for existing businesses.

- 79 In addition to partnerships, the Council is open to using expertise and experience from a variety of external sources. A significant number of managers have come from outside local authorities, and consultants and interim managers import experience and expertise from a range of occupational backgrounds. For example:
- the Council is making good use of consultants to boost capacity in producing its local development framework (LDF). It benefits by producing the LDF a year ahead of schedule, and also aids professional development within the RBC planning policy team by having a planning consultant working alongside; and
 - in environmental health, an interim manager is overhauling the environmental health service. A year ago the service was reactive and concentrated on basic statutory duties. Now it is starting to be a more proactive and customer-focused service, which is preparing a paper about the Council's role in health and which will be augmented by a part-time post in health promotion as part of a more strategically-oriented approach.

Staff and funding

- 80 The Council's medium-term financial strategy reflects its priorities in the corporate plan and its contribution to the Community Strategy. The strategy also makes good links between environmental services and national priorities such as the Government's liveability agenda. Environment is a high priority both locally and nationally, so the Council is committed to funding improved environmental services. The draft budget for 2006-07 has a strong focus on growth in topics that will improve the environment and the quality of SS&L services, such as an expansion in environmental education and enforcement.
- 81 The Council's preference for partnership as a mechanism for increasing capacity does not rule out external funding, but the Council strives to use it sparingly as an appropriate tool to achieve some objectives - for example lottery funding of £200,000 to achieve green flag status.
- 82 Staff morale and efficiency are improving as a result of better working practices – quality management, communications, team meetings and joint working across units. Staff appraisals are now routine; sickness within the service is being actively managed and absence reduced. Technical training aimed at career progression for NEAT and related staff help ensure good relations with customers, though there is a shortage of some job-related training.
- 83 However, though staff are positive about the changes, and describe colleagues as 'friendly', 'helpful' and 'team-focused', the rapid changes of staff and structures mean that the established interpersonal networks are no longer effective, and there is a sense among staff that they need to settle down and get to know the new arrangements in order to give the best service. Some partners remark on the high rate of staff turnover.

- 84 Vacancies and a lack of succession planning in some areas could shortly affect the implementation of development and regeneration projects. Three posts at the top of the environmental health, planning and regeneration services are currently vacant, and the planning service in particular has been subjected to significant change and disruption.

Support services

- 85 Environmental services use technology to their advantage. All refuse collection vehicles are equipped with tracking devices, giving customers and managers accurate information and leading to a substantial reduction in missed bin rates over the last year. A future plan is to link the software to the Council's website so that residents can get real-time information about their refuse collection rounds. GIS mapping is starting to make its mark (and is starting to influence councillors) - for example the Council has mapped all play areas in the borough to inform a plan to provide fewer but better ones. Users can pay for services electronically, including over the telephone.
- 86 The Council has opened a one-stop shop in Rawtenstall, and exit interviews show it is popular with customers. Though staff can offer limited help in environmental services at present, apart from access to the planning service (benefits services are the main priority in this initial phase), and the neighbourhood offices in each locality have closed, it represents in users' eyes an improvement on what came before. Environmental services are the next major area to be added, and SS&L is at present mapping its work processes prior to training customer service staff in their use. However, there is no process improvement stage before a service is offered thorough the one-stop shop, so the service is missing an opportunity to improve efficiency.

Summary

- 87 In summary, the Council has made progress in transforming environmental services over the last three years, and performance is improving. It now faces the challenge of bringing ideas together to define Rossendale's relationship to its environment and how best to manage its environmental assets. Not all policies are in place; there is no economic development, tourism or asset management strategy, and others such as the open spaces strategy have accumulated baseline statistics but have yet to use them in a plan. The Council recognises that the size of its improvement agenda means that some of its capacity must come from outside the organisation, and has proved resourceful and adaptable in using partnerships, joint working, consultancy and outsourcing to deliver improvement. Staff and financial resources are generally delivering the resources required, though high staff morale and support for what managers are doing have to be balanced against staff turnover and vacancies that challenge the efficiency of new arrangements. We therefore assess the Council as having **promising** prospects for improvement.