

Corporate Assessment Report

July 2007



# **Corporate Assessment**

**Rossendale Borough Council**

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# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>5</b>
Areas for improvement	6
<b>Summary of assessment scores</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Context</b>	<b>8</b>
The locality	8
The Council	9
<b>What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?</b>	<b>10</b>
Ambition	10
Prioritisation	12
Capacity	14
Performance management	18
<b>What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?</b>	<b>20</b>
Achievement and improvement	20
<b>Appendix 1 - Framework for Corporate Assessment</b>	<b>26</b>

## Introduction

- 1 Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) is the means by which the Audit Commission fulfils its statutory duty under section 99 of the Local Government Act 2003 to make an assessment, and report on the performance, of local authorities. Corporate assessment is one element in the overall assessment that leads to a CPA score and category.
- 2 The purpose of the corporate assessment is to assess how well the Council engages with and leads its communities, delivers community priorities in partnership with others, and ensures continuous improvement across the range of Council activities. It seeks to answer three headline questions which are underpinned by five specific themes.

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

- Ambition
- Prioritisation

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

- Capacity
- Performance management

What has been achieved?

- Achievement and Improvement

## Executive summary

- 3 The corporate assessment in 2004 judged Rossendale as 'Poor' stating that the limitations in terms of people, skills, experience, systems and resources were of such significance as to seriously hinder the pace of improvement. Over the past three years the Council has worked extremely hard to turn round the problems faced in all areas of its business and can now demonstrate considerable progress. Its current performance is good and it is improving performance in most areas although some are from a low base.
- 4 The Council has an ambitious programme of improvement, which is based on a well-developed and clear understanding of local needs. Its vision, which it shares with partners, is to make Rossendale 'a cracking place to live'. The Council demonstrates a firm resolve to improve the quality of life for local people and visitors. It is working to improve job opportunities, housing, regenerate the main towns and develop its rural assets for leisure activities. The Council's ambitions for the borough are well understood and shared by staff, partners and the public.
- 5 Through a Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) the Council and partners are successfully tackling areas of greatest need. The long-term vision for the community is clear. Lead councillors and officers provide visible and effective community leadership. The Council has a well-developed understanding of local needs, and has used this effectively to formulate its priorities for improvement. These priorities have been translated into strategies and action plans which focus on addressing key issues. This focus has in turn resulted in appropriate increased investment in priority areas.
- 6 The Leader and Chief Executive demonstrate effective political and managerial leadership and are well respected by partners. The Council has used this leadership to influence the wider sub-regional agendas of community cohesion and improved outcomes for children and young people, in pursuit of its ambitious plans to gain maximum benefit for the borough.
- 7 The Council has made significant structural and cultural changes over the past three years which have resulted in a positive attitude throughout the Council. Councillors and officers work well together. The Council has built up sufficient financial reserves from a very low base through sound financial management. It uses a range of innovative procurement approaches to ensure it can maintain the capacity to deliver on its ambitions. Performance is improving. The Council has clear arrangements in place to assess and review service performance, and make sure staff are aware of their responsibilities in this area. Sickness absence has reduced dramatically, however addressing value for money remains a challenge for the Council.
- 8 The Council's recovery journey and the need to change have resulted in a strong performance-driven culture. Well established systems are used to monitor and manage its own and partners' performance. It has had to be proactive in learning effectively from others and is now enthusiastic about sharing its expertise with partners.

- 9 The Council is making adequate progress in achieving its ambitions for the borough, narrowing the gap between its performance and national averages in key areas. Performance indicators show that there is a track record of improvement although most are from a low base. There is some good progress in terms of physical and economic regeneration and planning services are improving. Environmental services have been completely turned around and are now top performing with some good environmental improvements. The housing market renewal initiative has resulted in improvement and improved quality of life.
- 10 The Council's contribution towards reducing crime and fear of crime is effective and the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership is highly rated by the Government Office. The Council's contributions towards improving opportunities for children and young people are significant. The Council is building community capacity through its community network and a generous £216,000 fund for community and voluntary groups. Plans to promote Rossendale as a tourist attraction and extreme sports resort are well developed and have attracted external approval and investment.

## Areas for improvement

- 11 The Council should ensure that it has the monitoring systems and capacity in place to continue to improve in line with its ambitions for the future and that this is sustainable.
- 12 To ensure that the Council can achieve value for money in all services it should ensure that there is greater integration between cost, performance and operational activity with regular monitoring of value for money in day to day management.
- 13 To improve access and inform target setting and service planning within cultural services the Council should develop a comprehensive picture of usage of these services by putting in place management systems to enable service areas to measure usage by people from targeted communities and identify barriers to participation.

## Summary of assessment scores

Headline questions	Theme	Score*	Weighted score
What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?	Ambition	4	8
	Prioritisation	3	6
What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?	Capacity	3	6
	Performance management	3	6
What has been achieved?	Achievement and Improvement	2	14
<b>Weighted score</b>			<b>40</b>
<b>CPA category</b>			<b>Good</b>

### \*Key to scores

- 1 – below minimum requirements – **inadequate performance**
- 2 – at only minimum requirements – **adequate performance**
- 3 – consistently above minimum requirements – **performing well**
- 4 – well above minimum requirements – **performing strongly**

### \*\*Banding thresholds for determining CPA category

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

## Context

### The locality

- 14 Rossendale is one of the smallest Lancashire districts, with a slowly rising population of 66,000 and 3.5 per cent from ethnic minority backgrounds. It covers 138 square kilometres between the conurbations of West Yorkshire and Greater Manchester. The borough is a mix of urban and rural areas with urban development along the valley of the River Irwell and more isolated rural settlements in the surrounding moorland. A string of former mill towns – Bacup, Rawtenstall, Haslingden - run east-west along the narrow valley floor. There are over 260 listed buildings and 8 conservation areas within the borough. English Heritage describes Bacup as one of the best examples of a preserved mill town in the country. Transport links are good, with easy access to Manchester and the industrial towns in the north east of the county.
- 15 Although manufacturing industry is in decline it still employs a quarter of the borough's workforce. Despite this local employment base, the number of people who are economically active in Rossendale is nearly 20 per cent lower than the national average of 74.7 per cent and wage rates are low. People who work in the borough earn a median weekly wage of £289, well below both regional and national averages. In contrast, half of the working population commute out of the borough for employment, mainly in Greater Manchester, and earn a median weekly wage of £360, which is higher than regional and national averages. This gap between the wages of half the residents and employees is the largest in Lancashire, and together with health and housing statistics points to considerable diversity among social and economic groups in the borough.
- 16 On the index of multiple deprivation, Rossendale ranks 92nd among English councils, between its neighbours Calderdale (86th) and Bury (97th). Aspects of deprivation such as crime and employment show few extremes, but there are pockets of high health deprivation at a local level with one in five of these localities in the 10 per cent most deprived in the country.
- 17 The area is generally affluent, ranked as the 224th most deprived district out of 354 nationally. However, this masks pockets of deprivation at a local level, with six localities in the 25 per cent most deprived nationally.
- 18 Rossendale has a total of 29,574 residential properties with 72 per cent of households owning their own home. However, demand for affordable housing is growing in the area. Three wards within the borough are Housing Market Renewal areas with just over 5,500 dwellings in Bacup, Stacksteads and Britannia falling within the government's 'Elevate' intervention programme. This has seen over £4.7 million invested in the area including refurbishment of over 270 properties and the demolition of 29 low demand properties.
- 19 The Council transferred its housing stock to Greenvale Homes in April 2006. This has enabled a substantial programme of repairs and improvements to tenants' homes.



## The Council

- 20 The Council has 36 Councillors representing 14 wards. The political majority changed in 2004 and at the time of the Corporate Assessment there were 24 Conservative councillors, 10 Labour and 2 independents. 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 for 2007/08 is estimated to be £11.2 million, the greatest share going to environmental services, and a capital programme of £5.274 million. The Council employs 230 staff (full-time equivalent). In 2004, the Council completed an organisational review with the appointment of new key officers. A new Chief Executive and Deputy Chief Executive were appointed in 2006.
- 21 The corporate assessment in 2004 judged Rossendale as 'Poor' stating that the limitations in terms of people, skills, experience, systems and resources were of such significance as to seriously hinder the pace of improvement. The Council entered a recovery phase for the first year, centred on a largely internal capacity building agenda. Audit Commission progress assessments have gradually expressed confidence in the Council's capacity to improve services. In 2005 the department of Communities and Local Government (CLG) was sufficiently satisfied with the Council's progress that a separate recovery plan was no longer needed. In 2006 progress had been sustained enough for the CLG to move to a 'lighter touch' engagement regime.

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

### Ambition

- 22 The Council is performing strongly in this area. Its challenging but achievable ambitions are based on good consultation and analysis. Over the past three years the Council has steadily moved from internally focused improvement activity to developing and fulfilling its place-shaping role through strong community leadership. Through this leadership and excellent partnership working, the Council has shown that it understands what is important to local people and has positioned itself to deliver substantial improvements in these areas.
- 23 The Council shares with partners a well-understood, ambitious agenda to improve the social, economic and environmental well-being of the area and deliver improvements that will be noticed by service users and residents. Since 2005 it has championed the development of the vision 'Rossendale - a cracking place to live' and has worked hard to raise the profile and aspirations of the area through developing a highly effective Local Strategic Partnership (LSP). Ambitions for Rossendale are set out clearly in the Community Strategy 2005-2020, 'Rossendale Alive' which all stakeholders are fully signed up to. This long term strategy is supported by eight strategic objectives relating to community safety; health; education; the environment; housing; the economy; a community network and culture. Each theme is described in detail and makes it clear what partners intend to achieve. Through effective partnership working, the Council has ensured that the LAA ambitions reflect local district priorities. The Community Strategy links well to the objectives of the Local Area Agreement (LAA) and its focus on children and young people; healthier communities and older people; safer and stronger communities and economic development and enterprise.
- 24 The Council's ambitions for the area are achievable. The Council is self aware and has adopted an enabling role, focusing on effective commissioning of services with strong contract negotiation and monitoring to maximise its capacity and function most effectively. This commissioning approach coupled with careful consideration of local priorities ensures that the Council can deliver sustainable outcomes that matter to local people.

- 25 The Council's strategic and operational plans support the Community Strategy and the LAA through its own priorities of: promoting Rossendale as a cracking place to live and visit; keeping our borough clean and green; improving health and well being across the borough; and delivering regeneration across the borough and delivering quality services to customers. It also contributes well to the cross-cutting themes of community safety and education and lifelong learning that are led by other partners. These ambitions are supported by three underpinning internal priorities of councillor development, human resources and financial management. This provides a cohesive planning framework for the Council and its partners. By sharing the same brand, the LSP and the Council demonstrate their commitment to close partnership working and joint delivery.
- 26 The Council demonstrates strong and effective leadership and has turned around its poor reputation that existed among partners within the borough and Lancashire three years ago. It is an effective champion of the borough, where the Leader and Chief Executive are perceived by partners to encourage wide ownership of issues, rather than dominating partnerships. The Council also plays an active role in East Lancashire and the wider sub-region. The Chief Executive is well respected and leads a county-wide community cohesion group. The Leader is committed to his own development and is now mentoring other councillors in the county. The Council also has a strong focus on the 'Every Child Matters' agenda and delivering improved outcomes for children and young people. It is championing work with partners to develop skills and ensure children and young people are safe through innovative schemes including the use of 'safeguarding' cards for staff and contractors.
- 27 The Council's ambitions are challenging and underpinned by clear plans and strategies in most areas which are informed by good baseline information. Strategies such as crime and disorder reduction, environment, community involvement and engagement, housing, open spaces, play and a smoke free Rossendale contain specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timed (SMART) targets with clearly defined milestones. Target setting is informed by good baseline information (the Rossendale profile) which brings together a wide range of statistical information at local neighbourhood levels. The profile is regularly refreshed to ensure data is up to date and comprehensive using various sources including consultation exercises. This helps the Council and partners identify shortfalls in local provision, measure progress against targets and determine further actions in priority areas. There are gaps in the Council's intelligence network in relation to users and non-users of its leisure facilities. This means that it cannot be certain that it is successfully targeting its leisure services.
- 28 Community engagement is effective. The Council has a comprehensive consultation strategy and toolkit based on best practice elsewhere. This helps the Council to focus on the most effective ways to engage with specific groups. It uses a number of mechanisms to gather local people's views including surveys, focus groups and community development work with local groups including those representing black and minority ethnic and disabled groups. This ensures that survey work is representative of all communities. The Community Network is well used to communicate with local groups and activists and community representation on the LSP is good.

## 12 Corporate Assessment | What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?

- 29 Councillors, staff partners and local people understand the Council's ambitions. The Council communicates its ambitions, key messages and decisions inside and outside the Council effectively through its quarterly civic magazine *Rossendale Alive* and local press releases. Internally, there are regular staff, manager and councillor briefings and newsletters which are easy to read and well produced. There are also some original ideas in place. The 'Back to the Floor' days for the Executive team and Leader, and the 'Ask Carolyn' initiative are designed to allow staff easier access to the Chief Executive, senior officers and councillors. A staff survey in 2006 showed that 93 per cent of staff feel they have enough information about the Council's priorities to enable them to do their job.

### Prioritisation

- 30 The Council is performing well in this area. It has clear, high level priorities which reflect the needs of the community. These priorities, which are shared with partners, fit well with sub-regional, regional and national priorities and enable the Council to stay focused on what needs to be done and to resource it appropriately.
- 31 The Council is clear about its priorities. It has a structured approach to developing these and ensuring they are based on local concerns. The Council's current priorities were identified through priority setting events with cabinet members, partners and heads of service. These have identified local issues that emerged through councillor surgeries and consultation and were informed by the Rossendale Profile. Further consultation with middle managers, Overview and Scrutiny Committee members and residents was held in 2006 to refine the priorities before they were finally agreed. These refined priorities are included in all business plans and the draft corporate and best value performance plan which will be finalised in June 2007. This ensures that the Council has realistic priorities in place that are grounded in local research, clearly set out and understood.
- 32 The corporate improvement plan and business plans set out clearly how the Council links its activity to the LAA and community plan. It identifies the links to partners' responsibilities, key actions for delivering them, and challenging but realistic targets with defined outcomes. Joint strategies in areas such as community cohesion are shared among partners. Together, these mechanisms provide a good basis to monitor partnership activity effectively, and to measure outcomes and progress against priorities.

- 33** The only gap in the Council's planning arrangements is its economic strategy, but the Council has set in place arrangements to ensure activity is appropriately focused. The Council is developing its economic strategy in partnership with the LSP and although it has no clear targets for its overall regeneration work, the early draft outlines the broad direction that the Council wants to take for regenerating the borough. For example it has plans and joint funding agreements to develop the Adrenalin Gateway - an innovative project intended to raise Rossendale's profile as a major centre for extreme sports activity. It has also been successful in securing an indicative allocation of £1 million through the North West Development Agency (NWDA) housing market renewal area allocation for the regeneration of Bacup.
- 34** The Council has good service planning arrangements. The annual cycle of review and update ensures that the financial implications of strategic and service planning are accounted for in the medium-term financial plan. Resources are strategically re-allocated in line with priorities, for example to the priorities of promoting Rossendale through joint working with Groundwork on the landmark Halo panoptical structure and improving planning performance.
- 35** The Council targets its resources to priority areas. Following its Corporate Performance Assessment categorisation of 'Poor' in 2004, the Council's recovery phase for the first year centred on a largely internal, capacity building agenda - reflected in the priorities of the time. This phase also saw the start of a number of major projects focused on transforming the Council's service delivery infrastructure. The Council knew that it did not have sufficient resources to deliver significant improvement across all services at this time and so focused its activity on improving street scene through Neighbourhood Environment Action Teams (NEATs) and waste collection services as these were the clear priority areas for local people.
- 36** The Council has stayed focused on priority areas despite a number of significant organisational change projects. These include the transfer of its housing stock, the outsourcing of its revenues, benefits and customer services and the regeneration of Rawtenstall town centre. This focus has been achieved through initiatives to develop officer and councillor capacity, increase self-belief and confidence within the organisation and to motivate people to become more active in delivering improved services.
- 37** The Council has taken a number of challenging and important decisions around planning and development control issues where previously performance had been poor and subject to criticism. These include the closure of Haslingden Public Hall and the Astoria despite public opposition. It has also now defined much clearer roles and relationships between the Council and developers.

## Capacity

- 38 The Council is performing well in this area. It has responded to significant weaknesses identified in the corporate assessment in 2004. It has increased its capacity through extensive partnership working. Political and managerial leadership is widely respected and strong; decision making is effective. Scrutiny is developing well, with examples of positive impact. Human resource policies and new management arrangements are in place and have made a significant difference to the organisational culture which is now open and positive. A 'can do' attitude among staff is evident. Training and development for both councillors and staff is a strength. The Council's approach to equalities and diversity is developing well. The Council continues to face challenges in achieving value for money in all areas and risk management is not fully embedded in partnerships.
- 39 The roles and responsibilities of the Leader, councillors and officers and their delegated powers are clear. Councillors and officers work effectively within an ethical framework that is valued and adhered to. The Council has appropriate arrangements to ensure probity in the conduct of its business including a standards committee with an independent chair and relevant codes of conduct and registers. A standards bulletin and corporate governance information is available on the Council's website. This means that local people and partners can be assured of the correct conduct of the Council.
- 40 Relationships between councillors and officers are respectful, open and positive, providing a sound framework for effective and timely decision making. Regular meetings between managers and portfolio and shadow portfolio holders ensure good communication and facilitate team working. Decision making is transparent with open debate. The Council's constitution has been reviewed and enables any councillor to ask questions of portfolio holders at Council meetings without notice. This ensures leading councillors are held to account and means that decision making is open and robust.
- 41 The LSP is very effective. It is characterised by a culture of open debate and respect. Partners jointly share and own priorities and work together seamlessly. Officers and councillors do not dominate proceedings. They demonstrate leadership through enabling discussion and decision making.
- 42 Overview and Scrutiny plays an effective role in the decision making process. The chair of the committee provides good leadership and has implemented revised structures over the past 18 months which has resulted in more challenge. There are some examples of scrutiny having a positive impact and contributing to policy development and service improvement. Examples include a task and finish group on unadopted roads which has resulted in the county council considering the inclusion of these in their future work programmes. The service review of litter bins has resulted in additional provision and a replacement programme over the next three years. However the single call-in during the last 12 months may mean that opportunities are being missed for scrutiny to effectively challenge.

- 43 The Council is self aware about capacity and has ensured that it has the people and skills it needs to deliver its priorities. It has developed its capacity by challenging existing service delivery methods and encouraging innovation. It is proactive in finding ways to increase capacity through flexible working arrangements, contract management, and the use of interim managers. This approach ensures that the Council maximises the use of its existing resources.
- 44 The Chief Executive and management team provide strong leadership. This has helped the Council maintain its focus on key issues. New managers have brought wide-ranging skills and experience to the Council and these are effectively shared and used to increase capacity and improve services. For example, staff recruited to the NEATs were chosen for their confidence, knowledge and skills to drive improvements in the appearance of the area.
- 45 The Council has invested well to develop councillors' skills through a comprehensive programme of training and development informed by personal development plans. Councillor development is led by an executive member which increases councillors' ownership of their development. Training is reviewed regularly and attendance at training events is high. The Council was short listed for the Municipal Journal (MJ) Member Development Award.
- 46 The Council is developing its approach to improving value for money which has been assessed as 'adequate'. It delivers services that are generally above average cost with mixed performance. Improvement planning has led to better value for money; for example the reconfiguring of waste collection arrangements reduced costs and performance has improved. The Council is on target to exceed Gershon cashable savings as the structures and processes for savings and efficiency gains are in place through monitoring the use of business plans by the corporate management team.
- 47 The Council has built up financial reserves over time from a very low base and now has the financial capacity to deliver its priorities. It also has reserves in place to cater for unforeseen emergencies. The Council understands the future financial pressures it faces and plans for these. For example, it is managing financial resources to ensure that it can deal with the risk of future changes to the concessionary fares scheme. The Council's capital and asset management strategies have both received a good rating from Government Office North West (GONW). It has been successful in securing external funding in line with its priorities to increase capacity. For example, it has recently secured £450,000 to develop a team to deliver regeneration activity in the borough. The 2007/08 budget has allocations of over £1 million for new investments in priority areas but managed to keep the council tax rise down to 2.9 per cent which is below the inflation rate.

- 48 The Council effectively supports people to fulfil their roles. It has a comprehensive strategy in place to develop and manage people. It understands the skills it needs to have in place to deliver its priorities and has a competency framework against which the performance of staff is measured. It invests significantly in training and development and uses this well to increase the skills and capacity of staff. Training and development is linked to business plan priorities and the personal development plan (PDP) process. This ensures staff are equipped with the skills they need to deliver Council priorities. Some evaluation of the effectiveness of training in improving services takes place, but this is not yet systematic.
- 49 The Council has made significant investment in office accommodation and other initiatives to improve staff conditions and morale. The relocation of office accommodation from the town centre of Rawtenstall freed up valuable space for redevelopment and provides a much improved working environment. This investment and valuing of staff has improved staff morale which is now high and this is evident across the organisation. Sickness levels have reduced significantly over the past year going from an average of 13.5 days per employee in 2005/06 to 6.9 days in 2006/07.
- 50 The Council is successfully improving capacity through modern procurement methods, coupled with strong and effective contract and project management. It also ensures that partners adhere to the Council's values and high standards for customer services. It has improved services through strategic partnering and outsourcing of services. Examples include a smooth transfer of its housing stock which has enabled £40 million investment for improvements. It also has a trust arrangement for leisure services and a contract with a private sector provider to deliver revenues, benefits and customer services. A comprehensive framework is in place to ensure that equality is fully integrated in procurement processes. This strong contract management ensures that service quality is being sustained.
- 51 The Council works well with other partners to extend its capacity and deliver value for money. It delivers some services jointly with neighbouring councils and uses the skills within partner organisations to complement its own, for example good partnership working with Groundwork in Elevate projects means that the Council is able to access their design, consultation and funding skills.
- 52 Risk management informs decision making and planning at a corporate level with regular review mechanisms in place, but this is not yet embedded at a service level or within the Council's partnerships.
- 53 Information, communications and technology (ICT) and e-government are used effectively to deliver objectives and service improvements. The Council has renegotiated some contractual conditions with its ICT supplier to enable it to make use of new technologies. It has significantly improved access to its services through its strategic partner for revenues and benefits and increased internal ICT capacity. The Council's website is accessible and regularly reviewed and updated, enabling a wide range of its services to be available to the public all day and every day. This investment in equipment has not only benefited the Council but also the community. The old equipment has been donated to local schools and voluntary organisations.



- 54 The Council has improved capacity in the voluntary and community sector through a compact in place and a well funded grants programme of £216,000 for community initiatives. There are many examples of improved community capacity building and outcomes for local people. These are described more fully in the Achievements section of this report.
- 55 The Council has a strong corporate commitment to mainstreaming equality and diversity. Structures are in place to support this including a councillor champion, community reference and corporate equalities groups and flexible working policies to encourage diversity within its workforce. Nearly two thirds of senior managers in the Council are women. It has achieved level two of the local government equality standard and is on track to achieve level three by March 2008. Councillors have received training in equalities and diversity and awareness of the Council's commitment and approach is high among staff. Impact assessments have ensured that equality considerations are reflected appropriately in Council policies. The Council is also putting the building blocks in place to make services more reflective of local communities through developing neighbourhood management. Effective partner engagement ensures that neighbourhood planning is based on a multi agency team approach.

## Performance management

- 56 The Council is performing well in this area. There is a positive culture amongst councillors, managers and staff and a willingness to improve. Improvement has been driven consistently by the corporate centre. This approach is underpinned by a clear performance management framework with guidance in place. Performance in all services is improving overall and where there have been failures in the past, measures have been taken to address this. Performance monitoring within partnerships is well established.
- 57 A strong performance management culture drives everything the Council does. Performance management is integral to how people work. Senior officers set a strong example which cascades through the organisation. Performance monitoring arrangements are comprehensive and effective. Councillors have access to good quality monitoring information and portfolio holders have regular meetings with senior officers to discuss performance. Councillors from all parties are committed and enthusiastic about the role of scrutiny and work well together. The Council's performance management framework enables effective management of services through this focus. Particular attention is paid to service areas which are under-performing. This has resulted in improved performance, for example in planning, recycling and street cleanliness.
- 58 Performance monitoring information is easy to understand, accessible via the intranet and timely. The Council publicises its performance to the public through the Council newspaper and its website and reports this to partners through the LSP. This means that local people and partners have a good understanding about how the Council is performing in delivering its priorities.
- 59 Business plans are comprehensive and provide a good basis for team plans. Managers follow a corporate business planning model to ensure consistency, for example in reflecting equality and diversity and risk issues. These are linked to personal development reviews (PDRs) ensuring a 'golden thread' is in place. The Council has 100 per cent coverage for these. This means that all staff understand how they contribute to delivering service outcomes.
- 60 The Council's corporate customer charter communicates corporate service standards and reports progress against them to users through posters, its newspapers and its website. There are a few service specific standards, for example in planning and environmental health, but this is not consistent across all services.
- 61 Finance and performance management is reported jointly but is not fully integrated. The Council is exploring how it can better integrate resource management with performance management and is seeking out good practice from other councils to inform its approach.

- 62** Performance management within partnerships is effective. The Council has proactively shared its expertise at the strategic partnership level, and the LSP has adopted the same approach for the community strategy performance framework. This approach has enabled the LSP to identify priority areas for review. In recognition of this strong track record of successfully developing and delivering outcomes, the Government Office for the North West awarded a 'Green' rating to the LSP. This is strong evidence of the Council's changing approach over the past three years. The report found that there is good performance in many areas and those areas needing further improvement have clearly defined improvement points and ownership from the relevant agency/theme group.
- 63** Staff feedback is systematically sought to improve performance. The Council has a number of processes in place to enable staff to contribute their views. The MAGIC ( Make a Good Idea Count) staff suggestion scheme is linked to corporate priorities and 'back to the floor' exercises enable senior managers to directly access front line staff views. Staff reference groups are used to gather staff views, for example in job evaluation. These approaches provide regular opportunities to consult with a wide range of officers from across the Council about ways to improve service delivery.
- 64** The Council welcomes internal and external challenge to support its strong focus on customers and improve systems. Overview and scrutiny is integrated in performance management. Members receive quarterly reports of progress against key performance indicators (PIs) and have a clear role in scrutinising this. This focus supports improvement. Scrutiny work for example has resulted in improvements in the number of invoices paid within 30 days and reduced sickness absence.
- 65** The Council is proactive in identifying good practice and learning from others. This culture has grown steadily through the recovery process of the last three years. It has also benefited from recruiting experienced staff from elsewhere and is open to developing services in new ways to improve performance. It uses complaints to identify areas for improvement and make changes where needed. It has a corporate complaints system which is analysed regularly and reported to portfolio holders weekly. This ensures that lead councillors are fully aware of any issues that relate to their areas of responsibility.
- 66** The Council responds well to feedback. There are many examples including implementing recommendations from Audit Commission progress assessments and inspections. The Council also uses external consultants to evaluate and challenge councillor development. As part of its approach to continuous improvement, the Council holds regular reviews with councillors to identify the best way to distribute performance information.

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

### Achievement and improvement

- 67 The Council is performing adequately in this area. It has turned round poor performance in waste, street scene, planning and benefits and is starting to improve outcomes for local people. Levels of performance against national indicators are improving but several are from a low base. Based on the Audit Commission's context and performance information pack prepared for this assessment, between 2004/05 and 2005/06, 52 per cent of key indicators improved. In the same period, 26 per cent of indicators reflected top 25 per cent performance. Performance in the last 12 months has improved significantly with 89 per cent of indicators (unaudited) improving.
- 68 The Council demonstrates its strong ambitions to raise aspirations and improve the quality of life and is investing well in the building blocks which will address cross-cutting areas. However, it has a challenging agenda and although it is making good progress in areas such as tackling crime, economic development and environmental improvements, it is still on a journey in others and it will take some time before it can deliver the required outcomes.

### Delivering regeneration across the borough

- 69 The Council's successful transfer of its housing stock means that an enhanced decent homes standard (DHS) will be achieved for all former Council homes within seven years. The Council has made less progress in achieving the DHS for vulnerable tenants living in privately owned properties. It has an equity release scheme to assist home owners but take up of this has been slow, with only 19 schemes in progress or completed. This means that based on current approaches the Council will not meet government targets for achieving the DHS by 2010. The Council has improved its performance in dealing with empty properties with 35 returned to occupation or demolished this year compared to 30 in 2005/06.
- 70 The Council has a strong focus on regenerating town centres in the borough. It has a five year programme for the regeneration of Bacup and has secured an indicative allocation of £1 million through the North West Development Agency (NWDA) for housing market renewal. Work to redevelop the Valley Centre in Rawtenstall is at an advanced planning stage. The Council has worked well with the developer and the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) to improve the design quality of the development and to ensure they are responsive to consultation results.

- 71 The Council has been successful in achieving improvements to the quality of the local environment through good use of Section 215 notices (Town and Country Planning Act 1990) to enforce physical improvements to properties and pieces of land in the borough. It targeted 101 properties and pieces of land in the first six months of this approach and as a result 26 per cent of owners have complied, representing about £110,000 of improvements. The Council is sustaining its approach and has served 47 enforcement notices on remaining properties.
- 72 The Council has improved the planning service so that it is now more effective with new structures and processes in place. As a result, the service has tackled a backlog of developer contribution issues, has instigated pre application discussions and has developed a climate of trust and respect with developers. This helps ensure good schemes are agreed. Performance in processing planning applications has improved significantly; the Council has exceeded national targets, improved performance on major planning applications and is no longer a planning standards authority.
- 73 The Council and its partners have achieved some strong improvements to the economy of the borough. The number of VAT registered businesses has increased at a faster rate than both regional and national averages, demonstrating a healthy local economy. The percentage of the population with formal qualifications and qualified to NVQ Level 4 has increased at a higher rate than regional or national trends. As a result local people are becoming better equipped with skills to secure higher paid jobs.
- 74 Over the past year, the Council has made a significant contribution to the development of the local economy in the less affluent east of the borough through the Futures Business Park at Bacup. Council staff have relocated to this site from Rawtenstall and other offices. This has also assisted with the redevelopment of part of Rawtenstall's town centre and the introduction of a one stop shop for Council services.

### **Improving health and well being across the borough**

- 75 The Council is making a good contribution to help to improve the health of local people. Over 130 families have joined its smoke free homes scheme where over 200 children (22 per cent of which are pre-school age) now live in a clean environment. This has resulted in 25 people being referred to cessation services. In partnership with English Heritage and the Primary Care Trust, the Council has implemented a £5.5 million Local Improvement Financial Trust (LIFT) scheme. This brought back into use a dangerous and derelict former textile mill which now provides high quality health care provision for local people.

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

- 76 Through its leisure trust the Council has increased participation in its facilities with 54,000 extra visits but it does not have sufficient information to know if the facilities offered are targeting the right communities. There has been a significant increase in school groups visits to museums from 53 in 2003/04 to 708 in 2006/07. Customer satisfaction has increased by 5 per cent in 2006/07. However the gaps in information about who is and is not using leisure facilities mean that it cannot effectively target activities. The Council is taking action, in part, to address this. It has produced a white paper which considers the current leisure provision and all options including total withdrawal of provision. The decision has been made to continue provision and make some significant investment in facilities in support of the priority to improve health and well being across the borough.
- 77 The Council is proactive in involving children and young people in the design of its leisure facilities. There are several examples of involving them in the design and improvement of facilities such as skate parks, tennis courts and a £185,000 urban design project (Spacelift).
- 78 The Council has made significant investment to achieve affordable housing and has an ambitious policy to secure 40 per cent of affordable dwellings in new developments. Good joint working and the use of developer contributions has resulted in the development of 33 affordable homes in the past year. Through effective homelessness prevention, the Council has reduced the time homeless residents spend in bed and breakfast accommodation. This has decreased from 5.7 weeks in 2005/06 to three weeks in 2006/07 and the Council has not placed any homeless residents in hostel accommodation this year.
- 79 The Council is making a good contribution to reducing crime and fear of crime. The Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership performs well and is highly rated. Overall crime in the borough has reduced by 12.4 per cent this year. It is set to achieve national targets for a 17.5 per cent reduction in crime in the borough by 2008 through delivering partnership projects to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour. These include alcohol control zones, sports and leisure diversionary activities and projects to enhance life and employment skills. The Council has reduced local residents' fear of crime in the borough through partnership working, with a 13 per cent improvement in feelings of safety between 2004 and 2006; 69 per cent of residents now feel safe. The Council is continuing to invest in this area and has part funded with Lancashire police and other agencies three additional community support officers. They work as part of a neighbourhood policing team that includes community volunteers, police officers and special constables to provide a uniformed presence which has reduced crime and the fear of crime.
- 80 The Council is working well with partners in East Lancashire (East Lancashire Together) to improve community cohesion and is developing its approach to tackling extremism. The Community Cohesion Working Group evolved from consultation through the Rossendale Partnership and is delivering on its action plan. Practical initiatives are taking place, such as the H24YA youth group in Haslingden focusing on reducing inter-racial tension.

- 81 The Council uses its well-being powers to support its communities. Through the Council's community network, it provides £216,000 for community and voluntary groups. Examples of the benefit that this funding gives are support for multi-ability swimming and sports clubs; adaptations to community buildings and many other community group grants. The Council has invested in the replacement of Whitworth Civic Hall, a significant £1.4 million facility, which not only provides first class community facilities but also provides a base for remote Council services. It has the ability to become self-financing in the next three years and therefore enable the Council to reprioritise its revenue support for this project. The Council has also made land available for the construction of a family centre in Stackshead and a community centre in Edenfield.

### **Keeping our borough clean and green**

- 82 The Council has totally turned around its environmental services which are now good. It has exceeded its national targets for recycling waste with 27.5 per cent achieved in 2006/07. The Council has modernised its fleet with new state of the art refuse wagons and two additional street cleaning vehicles with geographic information (GIS) systems to improve performance. It has significantly reduced waste collection costs and now achieves top quartile performance. It is reducing the volume of waste collected against the national trend through encouraging people to compost and reuse their waste and is now best quartile performance. Access to environmental services is good. The introduction of locally based NEAT teams means that residents can easily report litter and fly tipping and the Council responds well to these. As a result streets are cleaner and the percentage of land littered to an unacceptable level has fallen from 18 per cent in 2005/06 to 12 per cent in 2006/07. Incidents of fly tipping and graffiti are below average.
- 83 The Council also has strong performance on enforcement and dealing with abandoned vehicles. It uses fixed penalty notices and powers under the Environmental Act 1990 to tackle those who are having a negative impact on the environment. It has reduced the number of reports of abandoned vehicles by two-thirds and removes 100 per cent of vehicles within 24 hours.
- 84 A number of physical improvement schemes have contributed to improving the environment including better signage, landscaping, improving bin storage areas, increased street play areas and community gardens. The Council works with Groundwork, Civic Pride and other organisations on projects such as cleaning up the riverbanks and the development of multi-use games areas.

### **Delivering quality services to customers**

- 85 The Council has made improvements that have made an impact on the quality of life of local people. Increased numbers of people in the borough think that their neighbourhood is a place where people from different backgrounds get on; 53 per cent agree this is the case, an increase from 47 per cent in 2004. Leisure opportunities have improved with 65 per cent of residents agreeing that there are lots of opportunities for outdoor leisure, an increase from 53 per cent in 2004 and 36 per cent of residents agree that their neighbourhood has clean and well maintained streets, an increase from 21 per cent in 2004.

**24 Corporate Assessment** | What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?

- 86** The Council has improved its approach to delivering services through a new one stop shop and an improved website. The Council's own annual telephone survey showed that customer satisfaction with the Council has increased from 27 per cent in 2003 to 62.5 per cent in 2005. Since the one stop shop has opened, 96.3 per cent of users of the facility are satisfied with the service.
- 87** The Benefits Service has improved since it was judged 'poor' in 2002 and is now rated as 'fair' and compliant with the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate's (BFI) standards. This means that customers' needs are being met more effectively. The ten year contract with a strategic partner demonstrates increased focus on value for money. The contract provides for a step change improvement in performance and a £190,000 decrease in costs. Between 2003/04 and 2006/07 performance improved and the speed of processing new claims dropped from 61.47 to 37 days which falls within the BFI standards range of 'adequate'. Home visits have risen from 17 to 267 and the council tax collection rate has risen from 94.3 per cent to 96.8 per cent.

### **Promoting Rossendale as cracking place to live and visit**

- 88** The Council places a strong emphasis on communication using a range of methods to get its message across and listen to local people's views. Effective and almost seamless partnership working with the LSP has led to key progress in a number of the Council's priority areas. There has been genuine commitment to joint working and promotional activity. 'Rossendale Alive' is a joint brand between the Council and the LSP. LSP Assembly events provide the opportunity to involve a wider group of people in the work of the LSP, share learning and develop ideas. Assemblies have focused on children and young people, older people and neighbourhood working. Learning from these events will inform the Council's sustainable community strategy and will be translated into more local action through neighbourhood plans.
- 89** The Council has a range of innovative projects which are aimed at promoting Rossendale. Although some are at an early stage of development and have yet to deliver outcomes, they demonstrate the Council's ability to engage partners and attract external interest to raise the quality of life and aspirations of local people and visitors. Examples include the following.
- The panopticon (Halo), bringing £540,000 regeneration funding into the borough, is one of six major landmark projects for 'Marketing the North to the World' programme. This will be supported by a major national and international marketing campaign.
  - The Adrenaline Gateway is a major project within 'Transforming Pennine Lancashire' which is focused on rebranding East Lancashire. This is intended to raise Rossendale's profile as a major centre for extreme sports activity. Partnership funding has been secured to develop the brand and projects within it. This is building on the existing offer which includes water sports, mountain biking and skiing.



- The recruitment of consultants to implement the first phase of the Council's tourism action plan including a Visit Rossendale web site, guide and dedicated tourism telephone line.
- Joining the Local Government Association's Reputation campaign, adopting the 12 actions that have a marked and positive impact on a councils' reputation. The Council has reached silver level and is on target to reach gold by 2009.

## 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 Rossendale Borough Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 16 to 20 April 2007.
- 4 This report has been discussed with the Council, which has been given the opportunity to examine the Audit Commission's assessment. This report will be used as the basis for improvement planning by the Council.