

Progress Assessment Report

February 2006



Progress Assessment Report

Rossendale Borough Council

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Progress assessments

In 2002, Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) was introduced at single tier and county councils (ST&CCs) and at district councils in 2003/04, as a way of supporting councils to deliver improvements in services to local people. CPA brought together existing information on service performance in councils with a corporate assessment of each council's ability to improve. This was used to reach an overall conclusion about whether a Council was 'excellent', 'good', 'fair', 'weak' or 'poor'.

Councils have prepared improvement plans following CPA and those councils classified as 'under performing' have received annual progress assessments by the Audit Commission. Those cases giving most cause for concern have also been the subject of formal engagement by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM). Through its network of relationship managers, the Commission worked closely with lead officials assigned by the ODPM in developing an appropriate monitoring programme.

Audit Commission progress assessment work has sought to measure the impact and sustainability of improvement activity. The progress assessment work has been tailored to local circumstances to provide appropriate public assurance and to contribute to improvement reporting. It involved an evidence-based judgement on progress against the original corporate assessment criteria, but without producing a score.

The progress assessment is part of the Commission's commitment to helping Councils ensure continuous improvement to services for local people. It does this in the context of its strategic regulation principles, which look to minimise the burden of regulation at the same time as maximising its impact. We are committed to working in partnership with other regulators and the ODPM in this aim.

Introduction

- 1 In January 2004, the Audit Commission published a CPA category for Rossendale Borough Council. This assessment categorised the Council as 'poor'. The key strengths and weaknesses from the corporate assessment are set out in Appendix 1.
- 2 This report presents an analysis of the Council's progress to date, based on the Council's implementation of its improvement and recovery plan and comparison with the baseline position of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment.

Summary

- 3 Rossendale Borough Council is progressing well. Political and officer leadership is much improved and the Council is now characterised by a more positive approach. Public confidence in the Council is improving, albeit from a low base. There is still much to do and it is important that councillors and staff remain focussed on ensuring that all services meet acceptable standards as the Council continues to transform key areas of its activities. Overall, good progress has been made in the last year.
- 4 The Council is clear about its role in delivering ambitions for the local community and recognises that it needs to review priorities to ensure better links with the community strategy themes and to take account of its own successes - for example in securing a positive response from tenants for the proposed transfer of housing stock. Priorities have broad cross-party ownership, are supported by staff, and reflect local people's concerns. Communication has improved but community engagement is not fully effective. Community leadership is beginning to develop but is an acknowledged area for further development.
- 5 The Council has increased its capacity to deliver improvement through an organisational review and by making positive use of partnerships to deliver services. However, it does not have the skills to fully support this new approach and is therefore making good use of external advice. Despite this, partnership working is an area of strength. High sickness absence continues to impact on resources despite some recent improvements.
- 6 Although there is now a much better approach to business planning, the approach to target setting varies. The Council recognises that more work is needed to embed effective performance management consistently.
- 7 Fifty-one per cent of best value performance indicators have improved with 26 per cent in the best national quartile. However, a sustained focus remains necessary to improve performance as 43 per cent of indicators remain in the worst national quartile. The Council's programme of fundamental service reviews is a positive approach to performance improvement.
- 8 The Council is aware of the significant challenges which remain to be addressed and has invested resources to address gaps in capacity. It has made substantial improvements in customer care through a new one-stop shop and customer care standards - part of a sustained drive to improve community engagement.
- 9 The Council does not have an up-to-date asset management plan or a capital strategy fully aligned with corporate priorities. This limits its ability to make informed decisions about the rationalisation and maintenance of assets.
- 10 Future plans include a strong focus on regeneration with an ambitious scheme for Rawtenstall town centre underway and a master planning exercise for Stacksteads and Bacup, resulting in visible improvements in private sector housing. The Council has a clear commitment to delivering these schemes and to sustaining and building on other service improvements it has made in the past year. It is making good use of its capacity to sustain the current pace of progress.

Recommendations

- 11 It is recommended that the Council:
- actively and promptly shares the findings of this progress assessment with staff;
 - presents the report to an appropriate public committee meeting; and
 - uses the key findings as the basis for revising the recovery plan in conjunction with any direction from the Monitoring Board.

Context

The locality

- 12 The borough of Rossendale, in south east Lancashire, covers 137 square kilometres, made up of valleys cutting through fells and moors. The population of the borough is 65,000 with 2.5 per cent from ethnic minority backgrounds. The main communities are based in the towns of Rawtenstall, Bacup, Whitworth and Haslingden. Textiles and shoe manufacturing form the economic history of the borough but since these have declined - partly due to increased imports - the borough has struggled to define a new economic identity. Rossendale has good transport links, with easy access to Manchester and the industrial towns in the north east of the county.
- 13 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. Customer access to services has improved by the introduction of a one-stop shop at Rawtenstall. The Council has also launched a customer charter and made improvements to its website.
- 14 In November 2005, the Council secured a 'yes' vote for the transfer of its housing stock to Green Vale homes. The transfer will take place in April 2006 and will enable a substantial programme of repairs and improvements to tenants' homes.

The Council

- 15 Rossendale Borough Council has 36 councillors, employs approximately 430 staff and manages a gross revenue budget of £9.8 million in 2005/06. The political composition of the Council is 23 Conservative councillors, 9 Labour, 2 Liberal Democrats and 1 independent. The decision-making structure has been confirmed as a Leader and Cabinet model after a period piloting this arrangement. In the past year, the Council has also completed an organisational review with the appointment of new key officers including a Deputy Chief Executive.
- 16 Since the CPA assessment in 2004, the Council has worked with the local strategic partnership to develop a community strategy and delivery plan, launched in June 2005, covering eight strategic themes.
- 17 The Chief Executive is due to leave in February 2006. Interim arrangements have been set in place for the Deputy CE to take on the role of Acting Chief Executive until a permanent appointment is made.

What is the Council trying to achieve?

- 18 The Council now has much clearer ambitions for the borough and shares a vision - 'Rossendale Alive' - with the local strategic partnership (LSP). These ambitions are articulated in the community strategy, revised in February 2005, which is now supported by a delivery plan containing targets and desired outcomes for each strategic theme.
- 19 Community strategy themes are reflected in the Council's corporate improvement plan. However, the Council needs to have clearer links between its business plans and those ambitions which it sees primarily as being the responsibility of other service providers. In practice, the Council is working well with partners to deliver cross-cutting themes, for example with the Primary Care Trust to deliver health improvement schemes, but this is not fully reflected in its corporate improvement plan. This omission may lead to potential contributions in tackling cross cutting areas being missed and their delivery lacking co-ordination.
- 20 Community leadership is beginning to develop but this is still at an early stage. The Council provides officer support to the LSP and councillors are supportive but their leadership within the LSP and the wider community is not fully developed. Council officer leadership is much improved, with a positive approach evident and a confidence amongst staff that the Council's vision of '8x8x2008'¹ is achievable. Political leadership is also much improved, helped by stable leadership over the past year. However, it is important that all Councillors continue to embrace the opportunities for their own development if improvements are to be sustained. Relationships between councillors and officers are appropriate and constructive, based on a good understanding of respective roles and responsibilities.
- 21 The Council is developing its knowledge about what matters to local people and ambitions for local communities are increasingly based on good research. For example, the Council is using detailed research and analysis to inform the review of services for younger people being carried out by the LSP.
- 22 Priorities have been reduced – from 33 to 8 key priorities for improvement – and clarified with broad cross-party ownership and co-operation. Three of the priorities are designed to ensure the Council has the processes and structures it needs to deliver outcomes for local people. This is a sensible approach, acknowledging the need to put in place stable financial, human resource and customer care arrangements to enable a wider focus on improving service outcomes.

¹ The Council's vision is that, by 2008, 8 out of 10 customers will be satisfied with services and 8 out of 10 corporate priority indicators will be meeting local targets and/or be in the top 25 per cent of performance nationally.

- 23 The Council's mechanisms for engaging with local people - area forums - are not effective. The Council recognises that it needs to make community engagement and involvement more effective. There is an appetite for engagement with the Council across the borough, reflected in a community network including over 400 local groups. The Council is now piloting a different approach to engagement, using the network. Whilst there are merits in this approach, a focus on existing groups could potentially exclude some local residents who may not wish to express their views through established groups.
- 24 Council priorities have been effectively shared amongst staff who understand, and support what the council is trying to do. Internal communication has improved through, for example, the 'daily message', the re-launch of the 'Grapevine' internal newsletter, corporate briefing sessions and team briefings. Priorities are also better communicated externally with the launch of a new Council newspaper 'Rossendale Alive'.
- 25 Revised governance arrangements enable a better focus on priorities. After a period of pilot arrangements, the Council now operates through an established Leader and Cabinet model with portfolios linked to priority areas. Role descriptors for portfolio holders have been developed linked to corporate improvement and business plan targets. The Council has demonstrated its ability to stay focused on priority areas despite a number of significant projects, for example on the transfer of its housing stock and the regeneration of Rawtenstall town centre.

How has the Council set about delivering its priorities?

- 26** Over the past two years, the Council has improved its capacity through an organisational review, recruitment to new key posts, extending and developing partnerships and new ways of delivering services. It is aware and realistic about its capacity and is taking a considered approach to determining the most effective way to deliver services given limited resources.
- 27** New approaches to service delivery have been developed. The Council has engaged positively with a new commissioning role where this is considered the best way forward. This is a significant development but there are inherent risks in the approach. For example, the need to develop new skills in procurement and client management and for councillors to maintain a focus on their responsibility to ensure quality services are delivered, albeit in some cases through arms length organisations or partners.
- 28** A number of key services will, in future, be delivered differently:
- responsibility for highways services has been transferred back to Lancashire County Council;
 - a trust has been established to deliver leisure services;
 - housing services will be provided by Green Vale Homes;
 - revenues and benefits will be provided through a partnership agreement; and
 - neighbourhood environmental action teams (NEAT) have been established across the four principal towns in the borough.
- 29** A human resources strategy is now in place which supports the move to commissioning and partnering for service provision. However training is not yet in place to develop the skills set needed for this new approach, potentially limiting the Council's capacity to manage partnering arrangements effectively. The Council recognises this and is using external expertise where necessary, for example in identifying a partner to deliver the revenues and benefits service.
- 30** However, targeted training is helping support succession planning through, for example, Certificate in Management courses. Staff development is a clear priority and morale is positive with a perception that the Council is improving.
- 31** Capacity remains restricted by sickness absence levels. The Council has raised the profile of absence management and through strong application of HR procedures as part of a drive on improved performance management, there are early signs that absence levels are improving in key service areas, for example in the street scene and liveability service.

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- 32 The Council is beginning to increase capacity through effective procurement. There are recent positive examples of joint procurement and partnerships being used to improve service quality and performance. E-procurement is being used to good effect. For example, in partnership with other councils this has resulted in a 59 per cent saving on stationery consumables.
- 33 Effective partnership working is further enhancing capacity with the master plan for Rawtenstall town centre leading to increased retail investment. Partners have commented on good Council leadership and describe positive working relationships. However, the Council has not evaluated its involvement in all partnerships and so does not know the added value of its overall partnership activities.
- 34 Financial capacity has improved and the Council has increased its reserves though from a low base. It now has a medium-term financial plan in place to provide a framework for resource allocation in the future.
- 35 Performance management is strengthening but requires further development. A new IT system is in place for monitoring progress against key indicators. This is being further developed this year to include other business plan targets. Councillors are being trained in the new system. However, business plans do not yet reflect some of the community strategy priorities and the approach to target setting is inconsistent. More work is needed to embed performance management and to extend it to cross cutting areas including LSP activities.
- 36 Customer standards are now in place across the Council but service standards against which to measure performance are not applied consistently. As a result, some service users do not know what standards of service they can expect to receive.
- 37 The Council has improved coverage of its performance development (appraisal) process and now has total coverage. Staff are now able to see more clearly how their role contributes to the overall achievement of wider corporate priorities.
- 38 The Council is becoming more aware of the risks it faces. A risk management strategy has been agreed together with a risk-based audit plan based around priorities for improvement. The risk management process is being transferred to the new performance management system. This should help ensure that risks are considered and managed in decision-making and are integrated within the performance management framework.

What has the Council achieved/not achieved to date?

- 39 The Council recently carried out a residents' survey which showed an overall satisfaction level of over 60 per cent. The most recent best value indicator for overall satisfaction with the Council (for 2003/04) showed satisfaction at 35 per cent. Although the two surveys are not directly comparable, this latest survey result is nonetheless very encouraging.
- 40 Satisfaction levels for parks and open spaces, waste collection and cleanliness and handling of complaints is poor. Satisfaction with sports, leisure and museums and galleries has fallen and is below average; satisfaction with recycling facilities has improved and is above average.
- 41 Overall, the Council's performance on 51 per cent of best value indicators has improved since 2002/03. It now has 26 per cent of its best value indicators in the best 25 per cent nationally. However, 43 per cent of indicators remain in the worst 25 per cent nationally.
- 42 Environmental services have shown significant improvement with some areas of performance now amongst the best nationally. The Council's recycling rate has increased from 10 per cent to 22 per cent and waste collected has dropped from 393 to 377 kilograms per household.
- 43 Other service areas show a mixed picture. The Council has done extremely well in processing minor planning applications and is among the best nationally. However, performance for major applications is poor. Council tax collection is good but performance in collecting business rates is poor. Housing benefit services have improved significantly across a range of indicators. This is an important service affecting the most vulnerable members of the community. The Benefits Fraud Inspectorate (BFI) has recognised the improvement and assessed the service as 'fair'; it was previously 'poor'.
- 44 Housing services show improvement in some areas, for example the proportion of rent collected and the energy efficiency of council homes, but other areas have not improved, for example the percentage of response repairs for which the council made and kept an appointment. Satisfaction with cultural services remains below average.
- 45 Performance indicators do not show the full picture of improvement activity across the Council. It is now better placed to contribute with key partners to a range of cross cutting improvements across the community. Working with the PCT, it has helped to establish a health improvement scheme; crime levels in general are reducing and four NEAT teams have been set up across the borough. These are locally based with officers working directly with local communities to tackle environmental and community safety problems. They are well received and have had some early successes, for example in developing a partnership approach with Whitworth Town Council to employ a town centre caretaker.

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- 46** The Council has worked well to engage with young people, for example through the NEAT teams in Haslingden. It has responded to their concerns for increased facilities and has developed a youth shelter in Staghills.
- 47** The Council is aware of what has not been achieved and where there are gaps in its capacity to deliver. To address these it has invested resources in services to improve delivery and has put in place building blocks to address gaps in capacity, including:
- investment in councillor training with good take up of personal development plans;
 - securing external resources to fund future plans, for example for a feasibility study for the proposed Adrenaline Gateway;
 - the establishment of the one-stop shop and an improved approach to customer access for Council services; and
 - a programme of fundamental service reviews to challenge performance and improve quality and value for money.

In the light of what the Council has learned to date, what does it plan to do next?

- 48 The Council shows a high level of self awareness about what still needs to be achieved and possible solutions. For example, following the fundamental service review of street scene and liveability it has agreed to pursue a partnering approach in recognition of the limited resources it has to improve the service within the Council.
- 49 The Council has a very positive approach to learning from others, seeking good practice from other councils and external agencies as appropriate. It has also learned from its own experience. For example, it gathered valuable knowledge from its experience in developing the leisure trust and has transferred this knowledge to its approach to the transfer of its housing stock.
- 50 There is some sharing of learning across the Council through the senior management team but systematic sharing of learning is not in place for all staff. This means that opportunities to learn more widely across the Council and from frontline staff may be missed.
- 51 The Council is clear about its future plans and its role in delivering ambitions for the local community. It sees its role as one of commissioning the majority of services with direct provision limited to regulatory services and those where a market does not currently exist. This approach will enable it to free up resources to focus on developing community leadership - a recognised area for improvement. It also recognises that it needs to review its own priorities to ensure better links with the community strategy and to take account of areas where it has achieved results, for example the housing stock transfer.
- 52 Future plans include a strong focus on regeneration with progress being made to implement the ambitious scheme for Rawtenstall town centre and the completion of a recent master planning exercise for Stacksteads and Bacup. The Council has well advanced plans to extend the NEAT teams and improve their effectiveness through co-location with police offices. It plans to build on successes in improving recycling by including collection of cardboard and textiles from March 2006.
- 53 Some gaps in statutory plans remain. The Council does not have an up-to-date asset management plan or capital strategy. Condition surveys are due to be completed by the end of the year to inform the development of an asset management plan but currently the Council lacks information about its property holdings. This means it is unable to make informed decisions about the rationalisation and maintenance of assets.
- 54 Staff are involved in developing future plans in their service areas through the business planning process, team meetings and workshop away days. Positively the Council is keen to extend this further to increase ownership of priorities and capture staff knowledge.

Appendix 1 – Summary of theme scores and strengths/weaknesses as reported in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment in 2004

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Ambition	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commitment to a programme of recovery and improvement through an ambition to move from provider to commissioner role. • Community strategy agreed through the LSP, outline vision for improvement and corporate objectives. • Strong officer leadership from the senior management team. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vision for the area and the future of the council is underdeveloped. • Outcomes for the area and local people are not articulated in aims and objectives. • Aim for the Council as commissioner is not clearly articulated. • 8x8x2008 vision is underdeveloped. • Lack of a policy and strategy framework to guide leadership and service activity. • Ambitions for cross-cutting issues do not feature strongly and are not clearly articulated. • Community leadership role of the council is underdeveloped. • Lack of clear political vision.

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Prioritisation	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Starting consultation and efforts to engage public opinion. Recent prioritisation of the recovery agenda. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are and are not priorities is not clear within the Council or to the public and partners. Weak research and intelligence base on which to set clear priorities and action. No medium-term financial strategy. Little mainstreaming of funding to address cross-cutting issues. No public communication of any expected improvements in services.
Focus	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improvement Board and management team action plan acts as focus for recovery agenda. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of systems, strategies and processes to ensure focus on what matters. No track record of taking and sticking to tough decisions. Lack of sound information base for decisions. Meetings, agendas and reports do not ensure focus on highest priority issues.

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Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Capacity	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New senior management team. • Capacity borrowed and bought in from partners. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limitations in people, skills, experience, systems and resources, particularly: procurement skills, financial strategy, ICT. • Low levels of reserves, and unsustainable HRA. • Officer/member relationships are not sufficiently challenging or productive. • Insufficient numbers of staff and managers engaged with the need to improve. • Limited development of members and roles – insufficient knowledge base. Scrutiny underdeveloped. • Capacity limitations are not sufficiently recognised in plans and ambitions.
Performance management	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outline framework for managing performance now in place. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of clear service priorities and standards. • Lack of a culture of managing performance and service improvement – limited engagement in the active management of performance. • Little involvement of members in challenging or scrutinising performance. • Lack of robust, accurate information, concerns over accuracy of national indicators. Lack of awareness of current performance levels of service provided to customers. • Value for money and risk management considerations operationally weak.

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Achievement in quality of service	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building control and local searches show good comparative performance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public satisfaction across the majority of services is low. • Performance is amongst the worst-performing 25 per cent in many areas. • Benefits service is rated as poor. • Housing performance is at low levels in rents, voids and repairs. • Performance on waste issues average of below. • Lack of facilities for young people, cultural facilities poor.
Achievement of improvement	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvements in service performance in housing, waste, benefits are evident. • Services identified through CGI are showing improvements. • Noticeable by local people. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not showing consistent picture of improvement in any services – mixed picture. • Improvements have not yet reached the desired levels. • Sustainability of improvements, costs have increased. • Council tax collection has not improved. • Lack of discernible outcomes from cross-cutting activities. • Unable to track customer satisfaction.

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Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Investment	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council has developed a new atmosphere which signals the start of a change in culture. • Some key investment in staff/partner capacity, systems, resources. • Responsive to external challenge. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Majority of building blocks still not in place. • Framework of policies, strategies and systems. • Procurement strategy and processes. • Financial strategy. • Management, member and organisational development. • Customer feedback.
Learning	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-awareness of issues at senior level. • Staff encouraged to learn from others. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited implementation of what has been learned. • Members not yet engaged in learning from others. • Lack of systems and processes for sharing learning or reviewing effectiveness. • Lack of customer feedback or impact information to drive improvement.
Future plans	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning activity is ongoing, some key plans nearing completion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of clear set of robust, resourced future plans. • Financial planning for the medium-term is weak, HRA is unsustainable. • A number of statutory plans not in place. • Key risk areas not sufficiently planned for. • Insufficient clarity about desired outcomes.

Scoring key:
 1 – Weak;
 2 – Weaknesses outweigh strengths;
 3 – Strengths outweigh weaknesses; and
 4 – Strong.

Appendix 2 – Progress monitoring against the findings of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment

- 1 The original comprehensive performance assessment was carried out under the Local Government Act 1999 and published in 2003/04.
- 2 Under section 3 of the Local Government Act 1999 ('the Act'), best value authorities have a duty to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the exercise of their functions, having regard to the principles of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. By virtue of sections 10 and 13 of the Act the Audit Commission may carry out inspection activity to ensure that a best value authority is complying with this duty, and may issue a report as to its findings. This progress monitoring activity and reporting to assess improvement falls within sections 3, 10 and 13.
- 3 The main elements of this progress monitoring report were collation and analysis of evidence from:
 - self-assessments of progress made, completed by the Council ;
 - appointed auditor evidence from performance and financial audit activity;
 - audited performance indicators, and plan assessments;
 - reviews of key corporate documents including performance reports, committee papers and management reports; and
 - Interviews and focus groups with managers, staff, customers and partner organisations.
- 4 This progress monitoring report for Rossendale Borough Council was collated by the Audit Commission and reflects evidence gathered over the period from December 2004 to December 2005.
- 5 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 reporting progress to any Monitoring Board and updating and improving any improvement/recovery plan as appropriate.