

Corporate Assessment Report

August 2007



Corporate Assessment

Newcastle City Council

The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively, to achieve high quality local services for the public. Our remit covers around 11,000 bodies in England, which between them spend more than £180 billion of public money each year. Our work covers local government, health, housing, community safety and fire and rescue services.

As an independent watchdog, we provide important information on the quality of public services. As a driving force for improvement in those services, we provide practical recommendations and spread best practice. As an independent auditor, we ensure that public services are good value for money and that public money is properly spent.

Copies of this report

If you require further copies of this report, or a copy in large print, in Braille, on tape, or in a language other than English, please call 0844 798 7070.

© Audit Commission 2007

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

Contents

Introduction	4
Executive summary	6
Areas for improvement	8
Summary of assessment scores	9
Context	10
The locality	10
The Council	11
What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?	13
Ambition	13
Prioritisation	15
What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?	17
Capacity	17
Performance management	20
What has been achieved?	22
Sustainable communities and transport	23
Safer and stronger communities	25
Healthier communities	27
Older people	28
Children and young people	30
Appendix 1 – Framework for corporate assessment	32

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
 - Considered against the shared priorities of:
 - sustainable communities and transport;
 - safer and stronger communities;
 - healthier communities;
 - older people; and
 - children and young people.
- 3 Corporate assessments are normally aligned with a joint area review of services for children and young people (JAR). For Newcastle the JAR took place in advance of the corporate assessment. The Council's achievements in relation to children and young people are assessed using the evidence provided from the JAR. In addition, examples of outcomes and activity, which are relevant to the other themes and which are identified through the JAR, are considered within the corporate assessment.

- 4 The JAR covers all services for children and young people that are directly managed or commissioned by the Council, as well as health and youth justice services provided by other bodies. It focuses on the contributions made by services to improving outcomes. The separate JAR report covers the leadership and management of services for children and young people and, in particular, the way that such services work together to improve outcomes. The description and judgement in respect of children and young people in this report is summarised from the JAR report.

Executive summary

- 5 Newcastle City Council is performing adequately. The Council has an ambitious agenda for the area and has an appropriate focus on its deprived areas. There have been a number of successes in improving the quality of life of local people although there is still some way to go to address the long-term problems around areas such as housing, health and the economy.
- 6 The Council changed political control in 2004 and the new administration has revisited its overall direction and ambitions. Its new regeneration strategy developed in consultation with local partners sets out a clear vision for the future of Newcastle, to create 'a vibrant, inclusive, safe, sustainable, and modern European City' by 2021. This is linked to raising the profile of Newcastle as a city region both nationally and internationally. The regeneration strategy will feed into the sustainable community strategy currently being prepared by the Newcastle Partnership, the local strategic partnership, and the Council's corporate plan for 2007/08. The Council also has developed ambitions which concentrate on the cleaner, greener, and safer agenda locally.
- 7 The Council provides community leadership and is working with partners at the city region level. The Council is developing its approach to neighbourhood management and community engagement is increasingly effective through structures such as the ward committees, including involving Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) and other diverse groups. Community and partner consultation over plans and strategies is strong and effective.
- 8 There is a clear planning framework but priorities are not clearly cascaded through key plans. There is an integrated approach to setting overall priorities for spending and the Council's ambitions are generally supported by a range of key plans and strategies. However, the relative importance of the priorities is not clear in key plans such as the corporate plan. Some of the key strategies have recently been agreed and action plans have yet to be developed. This is important if robust and consistent action is to be taken to deliver the Council's ambitions.
- 9 There is clear political leadership. The roles and responsibilities between officers and councillors for taking decisions are clear. Processes for governance are effective, but have not yet fully involved all strategic partnerships, which is important for delivering on the LAA. A fully effective corporate culture is not yet embedded. Issues include lack of clarity around accountability, and the lack of joined-up working among Council departments which undermines the Council's effectiveness and impact. The Council's working with its partners is improving noticeably. Partners have a wide range of views about how well the Council works with them and how 'joined-up' all of its actions are, and not all partners were equally positive in this respect.
- 10 Commitment to diversity is strong, with leadership evident and communicated effectively internally and outside the Council. Work on integrating diversity fully into service planning and delivery is ongoing.

- 11 The Council is using and developing its capacity to deliver on its priorities, but some processes are new and have yet to be fully evaluated. There is a strong strategic focus and commitment to achieving value for money, but this is aimed more at cost reduction and needs to be further developed. Scrutiny is not fully effective at challenging. Human resources policies are not all implemented consistently and areas such as workforce planning are not yet developed.
- 12 A comprehensive performance management framework is in place. Strong service leadership is using it to drive improvements in performance - for example, the Council improved at a better than average rate on the basket of performance indicators used in the 2006 Comprehensive Performance Assessment and satisfaction is high and improving. However, the speed of change is not uniform, with some weaker areas not changing significantly or improving outcomes. Improvement is not consistent and whilst target setting has an emphasis on improvement in low-performing areas, many targets are not being met. Improved performance management arrangements for the LSP are being put in place.
- 13 At present the achievements of the Council are variable in their impact on improving the quality of life. The Council is beginning to have a greater impact in creating sustainable communities. There are some clear improvements in different localities in terms of clean, green, and safe communities, although waste management and recycling performance is still comparatively weak. The Council has become more focused in tackling worklessness and seeking to raise the skills level of the workforce and as a result the labour market continues to grow stronger although performing below national average levels. Improvements in the housing market have been recognised in external assessments and by partners, but there remain areas of poor performance.
- 14 The Council is recognised as a community leader for the 'Safer Communities' agenda, with crime levels being reduced in the last three years and progress being made on increasing social cohesion. There are important areas where the Council's overall strategic approach is still to be developed. People in Newcastle experience worse than average health and high levels of health inequalities, and despite improvements there remain significant challenges. Approaches to promoting the independence of older people are not resulting in significant improvements but an overall strategic approach to meeting the needs of older people is being developed. Overall, outcomes for children and young people across the city are below those in similar local authorities and nationally. But there is increasing evidence of improvement, though some of this is recent and dependent on where children and families live or go to school.

Areas for improvement

- 15 There is an ambitious agenda for the area and it is important that the Council continues to provide appropriate, visible leadership at both councillor and officer level to provide a clear and consistent vision and direction to drive forward change and address the significant issues facing Newcastle.
- 16 The Council needs to better address a number of issues that have a major impact on the quality of people's lives. Among the key areas are reducing health inequalities, meeting the needs of all older people; sustainability such as waste management; and economic development.
- 17 The Council needs to simplify and clarify its priorities and objectives and their links at different levels in order to ensure that its ambitions and priorities are achieved. There needs to be greater clarity around what the key priorities are and how they link to the Council's ambitions and those of the emerging sustainable community strategy. Action planning needs to be further developed to ensure that policy is translated into practice in a consistent, coherent and timely manner. Clearly stated outcomes need to be linked to clear targets and indicators, and identifying the milestones, accountabilities and resources necessary to achieve them.
- 18 The Council needs to ensure a more consistent implementation of corporate policies across all departments, providing clearer accountabilities for projects and programmes, developing a more flexible culture to better meet deadlines, and strengthening its internal management systems.
- 19 Capacity needs to be increased by further developing and implementing consistently human resources processes, particularly workforce development, appraisal, and training for councillors and officers. More work is needed to further develop the approach to improving value for money which considers the relationship between cost, performance and user satisfaction levels; and a more constructive use of scrutiny to challenge and drive service improvement and better hold partnerships to account.
- 20 The Council and its partners have reviewed the structure and operation of the LSP. They need to ensure that the revised arrangements help improve the quality of life for all who live and work in the city, and improve performance management and governance across partnerships.

Summary of assessment scores

Headline questions	Theme	Score*
What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?	Ambition	3
	Prioritisation	2
What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?	Capacity	2
	Performance management	2
What has been achieved?	Achievement	2
Overall corporate assessment score**		2
*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		

**Rules for determining the overall corporate assessment score

Scores on 5 themes	Overall corporate assessment score
Two or more themes with a score of 4 None less than score of 3	4
Three or more themes with a score of 3 or more None less than score of 2	3
Three or more themes with a score of 2 or more	2
Any other combination	1

Context

The locality

- 21 Newcastle is located within the conurbation of Tyne and Wear in the North East of England and serves as the regional capital for a population of over two million people. It is mainly built up, but with more affluent rural areas to the west and north-west. There are areas of significant deprivation in the north, east and inner west. It has a vibrant city centre. There is a wide mixture of housing, from high density older housing, post-war estates to rural villages. There is a major regional airport to the north of the city.
- 22 In common with much of the North East, Newcastle has seen the decline of traditional industries. In the decade between 1991 and 2001 the population of Newcastle decreased by 5.6 per cent. Since 2001 there has been a growth in population of 3.8 per cent, and current government forecasts support this as a long-term trend. The population in 2005 was 276,400 (mid-year estimate). Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities made up 6.9 per cent of the population in 2001. This proportion is increasing, and includes recent migrants from the European Union accession countries. There are local concentrations in the inner west wards, such as Benwell with 15.6 per cent.
- 23 In 2004 Newcastle's Index of Multiple Deprivation ranking was 20th (out of 150 Local Authorities). More than a third of the city's population live in areas that are within the 10 per cent most deprived areas in the country, including areas that fall in the 1 per cent most deprived. There is higher demand for housing in the more affluent areas of Newcastle and higher house prices. The large-scale development at Newcastle Great Park is helping to address this issue. This contrasts with historically low demand for properties in the east and inner west areas, although recent price rises are changing this position. There are low levels of educational attainment, with some 16 per cent of Newcastle residents of working age having no qualifications.
- 24 Substantial inward investment has taken place in Newcastle. There are some 181,000 jobs in Newcastle and over 88,000 people travel in each day to work. The city also has a thriving night-time economy. There have been improvements in the number of jobs in the city and of VAT registered businesses over the last six years. However the labour market remains relatively weak in terms of economic activity and skills. Unemployment in Newcastle is high but reducing. In 2006, 6.6 per cent of the working age population were unemployed, compared to the average of 5.1 per cent for England and Wales. Life expectancy figures are below the national average and 22 per cent of the population of Newcastle live with long-term illness, above the national average of 18 per cent.
- 25 There is a sustained focus on regeneration within the city. The Council has invested heavily in environmental and physical regeneration, including projects such as Grainger Town, the Ouseburn area, the West End and Walker Riverside.

The Council

- 26** In 2004 the Council changed political control for the first time in 30 years when a Liberal Democrat administration took control. They currently hold 49 of the 78 seats. The rest are held by the Labour Party. There is an Executive of 10 including the Leader and Deputy Leader, with two Labour councillors as observers. The current Leader and Deputy Leader have been in post since May 2006. Each Executive member is supported by an informal portfolio group of back-bench councillors and senior officers. The portfolios are cross-cutting in scope and deliberately do not align fully with either the themes of the community strategy or organisational structure. They cover areas such as:
- Neighbourhood Management and Community;
 - Regeneration, Planning and Transport;
 - Environment and Sustainability;
 - Children and Young People; and
 - Transformation, Modernisation and Regulation.
- 27** The scrutiny function consists of a Scrutiny Management Committee and five scrutiny panels. The latter are chaired by Labour councillors, and two include external representation on the health and children services panels. The panels are Children and Young People; Environment; Health and Adult Services; Neighbourhood; and Regeneration.
- 28** The new administration has focused on improving outcomes in local neighbourhoods through enhanced engagement. Ward committees have been established with decentralised deployment and management of key frontline environmental and community safety staff to ward areas.
- 29** The Council is managed through four strategic directorates, although a new Adult Services directorate is being set up. The four directorates are:
- Chief Executive's Office;
 - Children's Services and Adult Services;
 - Neighbourhood Services; and
 - Regeneration.
- 30** The chief executive was appointed in 2002 and leads a corporate management team (CMT) of eight officers. This consists of the Directors of Regeneration and Neighbourhood Services, the Executive Directors of Operations and Business Management and Children's Services, the City Treasurer, the Assistant Chief Executive/Director of Policy, the Director of Communications and Marketing and the Head of Organisational Development. At the time of the assessment, the post of Director of Adult Services was vacant with recruitment in progress. The CMT is supported by two officer groups consisting of key heads of service across the Council. The Corporate Policy Group is responsible for developing and managing the corporate policy programme. The Business Management Group is responsible for the day to day corporate management of the Council.

- 31** The Council's net revenue budget for 2006/07 is £240.6 million (£872 million gross). Council tax for a band D property is £1,357, an increase of 2 per cent for the Council over the previous year. The Council has around 15,400 employees, but is under-represented from the ethnic minority community. In April 2004 the Council transferred its former social housing to an arm's length management organisation (ALMO), Your Homes Newcastle (YHN). Substantial resources are being invested to transform the housing market as part of the 'Bridging NewcastleGateshead' housing market renewal pathfinder. The Council was scored an overall 3 out of 4 on the Use of Resources assessment for 2006.
- 32** The community strategy, the Newcastle Plan, covers the period 2004/07 and was produced by the Newcastle Partnership following widespread consultation. It contains the broad vision to 'make Newcastle better for everyone who lives, works and visits.' The Council's corporate plan has seven corporate policy priorities which function as ambitions and align with the nine thematic areas of the Newcastle Plan. They can be summarised as:
- providing services that are accessible, good quality, and provide value for money;
 - improving educational attainment and encouraging lifelong learning;
 - building and supporting safe and clean neighbourhoods and communities;
 - creating an improved quality of life, devolving decision-making and empowering individuals and communities;
 - encouraging enterprise, investment, innovation and jobs;
 - creating an attractive city for people today and tomorrow; and
 - improving housing, health and well-being across the city and promoting inclusion and equality, and helping those most in need.
- 33** These have been further developed in the new regeneration strategy, which extends the vision to 2021 and sets out longer-term ambitions. The Newcastle Plan is due to be replaced by a sustainable community strategy in April 2007 which will incorporate much of the content of the regeneration strategy. The Council with partners is developing a Local Area Agreement (LAA), due to be launched by mid-2007.
- 34** The Council is also developing links at the city-region, national and international levels to further its ambitions and to make use of networking opportunities, such as those offered by Eurocities events. The Council in collaboration with the Government Office North East, One NorthEast and other regional partners commissioned a report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) on the future of the city-region.

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

Ambition

- 35 The Council is performing well in this area. Ambitions are clearly stated in various plans, and are based on good intelligence and consultation, and the Council has shown the ability to take hard decisions. The Council has demonstrated effective community leadership in driving its ambitions forward. Supporting plans are still being developed in order to ensure that the ambitions are delivered.
- 36 The Council has a good sense of place based on a clear focus on both the city-region concept and locality working. It has identified the need to concentrate on the wider area if its ambitions for the city are to be achieved, and is also seeking to raise the national and international profile of the city through various networks. It is also aware of the need for local differentiation in order to improve quality of life for all, through mechanisms such as neighbourhood renewal funding and New Deal for Communities.
- 37 The high level ambitions for Newcastle are clearly set out in the Newcastle Plan, produced by the local strategic partnership, the Newcastle Partnership. The Council's Corporate Plan for 2006/07 further develops the vision in the Newcastle Plan, and expresses it as being 'to create a vibrant, inclusive, safe, sustainable and modern European city'. Its seven corporate policy areas align with those of the Newcastle Plan and sets out how it will deliver the Council's contribution to the strategic ambitions for the current year.
- 38 The Council has now stated its long-term ambitions for the city and its communities in its recent regeneration strategy. The Council and its partners are moving towards the development of a Sustainable Community Strategy and the first stage of this was the preparation of a new regeneration strategy. The strategy takes a city-wide and holistic view of regeneration which is community-based, outward-looking, and partnership dependent for its achievement. It develops the Council's overarching vision and sets out various high level ambitions for the city and city region for 2021. The strategy is based on sound intelligence and widespread consultation with communities, partners, and other stakeholders, including the Newcastle Partnership. It has identified a range of specific outcomes for 2021 and how it will work to achieve the ambitions, with milestones for 2011 and 2016. The strategy links well with other recent long-term plans, such as the housing and children and young people strategies, and the LAA, and has incorporated their policies where relevant.

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

- 39 The detailed ambitions set out in the regeneration strategy are clear and challenging and work on developing associated delivery plans is underway. The Council is reviewing its key underpinning strategies, such as the Local Development Framework core strategy, which replaces the Unitary Development Plan, and area plans. A detailed delivery plan for the regeneration strategy is being finalised.
- 40 There is widespread understanding of what the Council is seeking to achieve for Newcastle, often expressed as being about regenerating the city. Given the newness of the plans, there are some partners and staff who are not clear about the detail of the ambitions and these are to be addressed through internal and external communication.
- 41 The Council has a good track record in involving its communities and partners in shaping its ambitions and priorities. It is developing various mechanisms including the Council magazine Citylife, the citizens' panel and specific user groups such as the elders' council, and focus groups. These include the BME communities. Many young people are able to influence the Council's ambitions locally through well-embedded projects and initiatives aimed at their involvement. The annual update on the budget and corporate plan are further examples of consultation with local people on priorities and services. This is helping to shape resultant service delivery and leading to higher satisfaction of residents with the Council.
- 42 The Council acts as an effective community leader both locally and regionally. The Council is pursuing an ambitious neighbourhood agenda and has a number of partnerships such as the Science City and with Gateshead Council on housing market renewal and destination marketing. Information and intelligence sharing with partners to inform respective ambitions is developing well. The Council is continuing to work to secure and maintain the active engagement of all of its key partners in addressing shared ambitions for the city and the city-region although it still has to ensure that all partners, including the voluntary and community sector, understand and share its ambitions. The Council has acted to strengthen the Newcastle Partnership to ensure that joint working continues to be effective and the partnership can be properly managed and deliver on all its ambitions and targets, including those of the LAA.
- 43 The Council has shown the ability to tackle difficult problems. Examples include keeping to the unpopular decision made by the previous administration on schools reorganisation and on adult services' provision. This illustrates that the Council can balance demand and expectations against resources, to maintain focus on its ambitions.

Prioritisation

- 44 The Council is performing adequately in this area. The Council has a good balance between national and local priorities which reflect the local context. Growth spending is in line with high level priorities and an integrated approach to planning. However, there is a lack of clarity in key plans about which are higher or lower priorities. Plans and strategies to support delivery of the priorities are still being developed in some areas, and action planning to deliver objectives is not robust in all cases.
- 45 The Council has an integrated approach to setting priorities and allocating resources at the strategic level through its budget setting process. Arrangements have been strengthened through the introduction of a revised medium-term financial plan (MTFP) with clearer links between budgets, the MTFP and overall strategic service planning. This involves councillors and officers in prioritisation on a rolling three-year programme. Within the MTFP process detailed presentations of comparative cost and performance for major services enables councillors to focus on securing efficiencies and value for money. In 2007/08, cost reduction targets of £6.1 million have been set, of which £1.9 million is to be reinvested into service improvements such as community safety, including domestic violence, and tackling housing and homelessness. The remaining £4.2 million plus £3.2 million of one-off savings will be used to limit council tax increases to below the rate of inflation, in line with the Council's priority.
- 46 The Council has responded well to national priorities and has ensured that its own priorities reflect local needs. The Council priorities are underpinned by firm quantitative and qualitative intelligence. This includes the Newcastle Neighbourhood Information System (NNIS) which is effective in fixing a baseline of data across agencies for the most deprived wards, and for various diverse groups such as BME. Being based on the needs and involvement of local people and partners it is more likely they are owned locally and improvements are recognised and become established in the local community.
- 47 There are some gaps in the planning arrangements needed to deliver the priorities. There is clear political leadership and focus around a core group of priority areas, which is reflected in overall resource allocation for growth areas, such as community safety and street cleansing. However, it is unclear how the relative importance of the priorities is reflected and how prioritisation has been converted to specific actions and targets. The budget process does allocate growth and budget reductions, which is an indicator of high and low priorities, but this is not clear in strategic plans that drive the allocation of resources. Understandably the Council has a wide range of plans and strategies which identify a large number of objectives. For example, the 2006/07 corporate plan has eight key priority areas and the nine portfolio plans within them have a set of 41 priorities and 56 strategic aims which articulate the vision and values statement. These are further developed into 252 specific objectives. The Council has clarified these relationships in its 2007/08 plan, which provides a clearer focus on the main priorities.

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

- 48** The Council is developing a comprehensive range of plans and strategies to support the delivery of its ambitions and priorities. Some are still being developed, such as the social cohesion plan and older people's strategy. However, where they exist, strategies and plans show clear links to the Newcastle Plan to provide a framework for the Council and partners to co-ordinate work; and to the corporate plan, portfolio, and divisional plans. However, not all action plans are robust, and many lack measurable outcomes linked to clear targets, milestones, and accountabilities. This restricts the ability of the Council and partners to evaluate progress and ensure achievement of its objectives.
- 49** The Council is good at identifying the impact and outcomes of its plans and policies on some of its diverse communities in relation to individual services. One example is in the disability strategy action plan where outcomes are clearly identified, such as improved access. The Council has also targeted hard to reach groups such as drug users and their families, homeless people, and the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transvestite (LGBT) community. Work is underway to ensure that groups who are currently not fully covered, such as the over-50s but below retirement age and older people in BME communities, are effectively engaged.

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

Capacity

- 50 The Council is performing adequately in this area. Responsibilities and roles between officers and councillors are clear and governance arrangements are effective. A fully effective corporate culture is not embedded, and there is a lack of clarity around responsibility and accountability for improving delivery. Partnership working is developing, including workforce planning, and the Council has a strong commitment to diversity. Arrangements for achieving value for money are developing. Some processes in place are new or being developed and have yet to be fully evaluated. Scrutiny is not fully effective and the Council is not consistently implementing some human resources policies.
- 51 The Council has developed a clear and inclusive approach to decision making at councillor and officer level. There is a clear separation of duties between councillors and officers in decision making. The executive and corporate management team review strategic issues together on a fortnightly cycle. There are regular meetings of the portfolio groups with mixed councillor and officer attendance to advise executive members. Although there are informal working groups, a structured timetable ensures that key decisions are fed into the annual service and financial planning cycle. This helps to ensure wide ownership of policy and challenge performance.
- 52 Governance arrangements are effective. The role of the monitoring officer and Standards Committee is well understood by councillors, with no referrals to the Standards Committee since 2005. Members of the Audit Committee receive appropriate information identifying key issues and they are becoming more skilled and experienced at providing challenge to officers. All these arrangements help to ensure transparency in roles and relationships.
- 53 A fully effective corporate culture is not yet embedded. Decision making is perceived by some to be slow and protracted, and lack impact in promoting development and meeting the needs of users, such as meeting the needs of businesses and developers. It is not clear to all partners who is responsible and accountable for delivering on specific strategies or projects. There are also issues concerning consistency of advice from different officers. Without improvements in the consistency and coherence of corporate management achieving the Council's ambitions will prove more difficult.

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

- 54** Cross-party scrutiny is not fully effective. It lacks a consistent degree of challenge or focus on policy development and performance management, and the impact on driving improvement is underdeveloped. It has yet to engage effectively with partners; although external partners are involved in giving evidence, they are not actively involved in providing expert advice to all panels. As a result, the scrutiny role is not holding the executive properly to account.
- 55** Risk management is good strategically. It is established as a key part of the budget setting process, and allows key issues to be brought to the attention of councillors and officers. The Council has been pro-active in addressing the risks of the financial implications of the equal pay and job evaluation review. Risk management still needs to be consistently applied to all corporate business processes, particularly with policy making and review and performance management, and embedded further at an operational level.
- 56** Arrangements for achieving value for money are still developing. The commitment to improving value for money is built into the medium-term planning process. There was a significant overachievement of the proposed efficiency savings for 2005/06. A priority for the Council is to reduce high costs and improve performance in services that are not currently providing good value for money. Significant service redesign has been introduced in some services to bring about these changes. While the profile of value for money has been raised within the Council, there is further work needed to bring together the three measures of value for money – cost, performance and user satisfaction levels.
- 57** The effectiveness of the Council's human resources policies in building capacity among councillors and officers is mixed. The Council has made sustained and significant improvements in reducing its sickness absence levels, although the level remains lower than others for 2005/06. It has set a challenging target for further reductions by 2009/10. Other policies are not yet applied consistently throughout the Council, such as the appraisal system for officers. Councillor training and development is actively promoted with some mandatory training for members of the audit and development control committees. A comprehensive programme has been formulated and is now being implemented; higher levels of commitment from members as well as better structured evaluation and feedback will be required to ensure the achievement of the intended benefits. At present this lack of consistency weakens the capacity of the Council to deliver its priorities effectively.
- 58** The Council does not yet have effective workforce planning embedded. The Council has identified the need to consolidate existing arrangements for developing senior managers into a formal succession planning strategy. The percentage of employees from BME and other minority groups remains lower than planned despite the various positive initiatives the Council has put in place to address this issue, and further work is planned. It has a recently agreed workforce development strategy but an integrated approach to workforce planning with partners only currently exists for Children's Services. The lack of such an approach means that it is more difficult for the Council and its partners to recruit, retain, and improve the skills and knowledge of staff to the benefit of service users.

- 59 The Council is increasing capacity through various partnerships. Strategic partners have been appointed in areas such as financial and legal services, with contracts sometimes based on outcomes with financial and non-financial benefits monitored. This approach increases capacity by drawing on the private sector thus increasing flexibility and options for efficiency savings.
- 60 Project management has been strengthened by setting up a dedicated major projects team, which has helped reduce slippage in the 2006/07 capital programme. Strategic procurement and purchasing are now integrated to maximise efficiencies, although the use of procurement disciplines to drive service improvement has proceeded more slowly than the Council anticipated. The Council has a successful track record in attracting major investment to the city as part of an overall financial strategy. This includes the successful use of PFI schemes, such as ones for street lighting and school rebuilding. While monitoring and evaluation of achievements is carried out, it is not always clear that remedial action is taken.
- 61 There is a strong commitment to diversity within the Council, with high level leadership clearly obvious through involvement of the chief executive and leader in actively promoting this agenda. The Council has appointed some diversity officers, and formed various diversity forums within the workplace. It has achieved Equality Level 3, and carried out equality impact and needs assessments (EINAs) across the Council. These are to be fully integrated into service planning to influence services to better meet diverse needs.
- 62 The Council has various access channels which meet many of the needs of its diverse communities. This includes achieving full electronic access to services where this is possible, and implementation of an integrated customer relationship management system to provide first point of contact resolution of most common issues. This followed specific targeting of hard to reach groups such as BME and disabled people. Physical access for disabled people to council facilities is still in the worst 25 per cent for all councils although access to the Council's principal service delivery locations is good.
- 63 The financial position of the Council is sound overall. The capital strategy and asset management plan have good links to other corporate plans and strategies. The Council expects a general reserve of £7.8 million and earmarked revenue and capital reserves of £62.2 million, including housing and school reserves, as at 31 March 2007. The budget process has improved with a clearer and more inclusive budget setting timetable and approach. This includes recognition of service demands and an assessment of value for money.

Performance management

- 64 The Council is performing adequately in this area. It has a comprehensive performance management system, with good councillor involvement. The Council makes effective use of external challenge and learning. Comments and complaints are being used to identify and drive service improvements. Performance management has improved performance across the Council although there are still areas of poor performance, and performance management systems are not in place with all strategic partners. Outcomes from measures linked to equality and diversity are still to be demonstrated.
- 65 The Council has a comprehensive performance management system. It provides links between the Council's ambitions and vision through the corporate plan, service plans, and the appraisal process to the agreed objectives of individual managers, and sets out in detail current targets for improvement. It is well supported by performance indicators and a balanced scorecard approach which supports a rounded approach to service delivery and improvement. It includes traffic light coding, comparators and the ability to produce exception reports. As it is web-based and interactive staff can access information on current performance and see progress against their targets. This allows a much quicker response to potential difficulties and supports continuous improvement.
- 66 Performance management arrangements with all strategic partnerships are still being developed. The Council is working closely with partners through the LPSA2 arrangements and the developing LAA and sustainable community strategy (SCS), particularly with the Newcastle Partnership. Performance management and monitoring is not done systematically across all themes. In some thematic areas, such as the Safe Newcastle partnership, processes are more established and perform well. In other thematic areas, such as health, there has been a lack of clear performance management. It is important that there are rigorous processes in place across the whole range of the Newcastle Partnership activities to support achievement of all targets.
- 67 There are strong corporate mechanisms to focus on improvement, but the impact across the Council is not yet consistent. Good use is made of comparative data to help set the context and comparative improvement required. There is political input through portfolio groups using the balanced scorecard to bring together both local and national performance data and customer satisfaction data. Officer mechanisms include the Business Management Group to monitor progress by targeting those indicators where performance is below target. This has resulted in improvements in service areas and in overall satisfaction with the Council. However, there is more to do to improve performance management. Action plans to remedy under-performance are not always robust and do not focus on the specific activity to be taken and what the impact of that activity will be, and so improvement is not rigorously pursued. Missed targets accounted for around 35 per cent of the total reported in Quarter 2 of the 2006/07 financial year, and 33 per cent at Quarter 3. Not meeting these targets will adversely affect delivery of the Council's priorities.

- 68 Councillors have a focused involvement in performance management. Portfolio Holders receive regular information on council performance and some information from the wider partnerships, including from the thematic groups of the Newcastle Partnership. To focus discussion at Scrutiny only the information relevant to the corporate portfolios scrutinised by each panel is presented, with the full Executive report being available if requested.
- 69 The Council makes effective use of external challenge. Reports on performance are now considered at a corporate level as well as by individual directorates to ensure consistent learning and implementation. The Council encourages external challenge and actively seeks to learn from other organisations, such as from councils having more success in reducing the levels of teenage conceptions.
- 70 Information on performance is shared effectively with partners. The Council has some good information systems, particularly the NNIS, which include details down to neighbourhood level, and increasingly provides information from partners and communities about outcomes. Information sharing is well established among strategic partners, such as those involved with civil contingency planning, with the Police, health and housing partners. Good information sharing across partners is facilitated by the children and young people's strategic partnership co-ordinator. This information exchange is important for focusing on achieving the Council's and partners priorities for local communities.
- 71 The Council is making progress in developing and integrating performance measures linked to equality and diversity. Some of these are well developed and have been integrated into the relevant portfolio plan for monitoring on a quarterly basis. Other indicators are currently under development as part of the drive to mainstream equalities and diversity work.
- 72 The Council has a well established process for encouraging and using customer comments and complaints to drive service improvements. These include the development of a new system for care team meetings in Children Services, and better signage at council facilities. The Customer Service Strategy includes an ongoing programme of independent research into service delivery, and a customer satisfaction questionnaire sent to all complainants once the complaint is closed. The latest annual report notes that 75 per cent of complainants were satisfied with the process. An annual report is made to the Executive and to Scrutiny, and feedback is made to those who have commented or complained, including why comments have not been acted upon.

What has been achieved?

- 73 The Council is performing adequately in this area. Its seven corporate policy priorities reflect the national shared priorities. These, with the themes of the Newcastle Plan, enable the Council and its partners to work towards achieving the national priorities while building in an emphasis shaped by local priorities. Some progress can be seen in all of these areas, although it is a picture of overall mixed performance.
- 74 The Council has re-emphasised its focus on regeneration as the main vehicle for delivering its ambitions and priorities. It is reducing the inequalities between the more deprived wards and other areas of the city. There is a good focus on users and finding out their views, with frequent consultation on specific service issues. Outcomes for diverse groups are variable, but the Council is developing good examples in areas such as working with young people to deliver more tailored service solutions. For other groups, such as the over-50s, there is less progress. Work on neighbourhood management and working is developing this focus on users and outcomes, including improving accessibility to services.
- 75 At present the effectiveness of partnership working is variable across the priority areas, with some strong features but other areas where development is at an early stage. There are weaknesses in how the Council co-ordinates cross-cutting issues and this has affected progress in several areas. Plans and targets are not always co-ordinated across areas, but this is now improving.
- 76 The Council's corporate, financial, and service planning frameworks are helping it to focus on achieving its short-term objectives as set out in its annual corporate plan and it is achieving improvement in line with its priority of improving poor performance, with some 70 per cent of key performance indicators (PIs) improving from 2004/05 to 2005/06 along with overall satisfaction levels which is above average performance compared with all English councils. However, the lack of clarity over what are key priorities and the weakness of some action planning to deliver objectives is resulting in many targets being missed. A number of best value PIs (29) are still low compared to others.
- 77 The Council has a clear vision for creating sustainable communities, and there have been improvements in line with the cleaner, greener and safer agenda, although not consistently across all areas of the agenda. There has been progress in tackling some of the major issues facing the Council in terms of the economy and worklessness, and good foundations are being laid. Community safety is showing good progress in many areas, although the Council has been slow in addressing alcohol abuse. The Council's response to other shared priorities, such as healthier communities and older people, has been affected by the lack of a strategic approach in these areas, although many individual initiatives are in place. This is now being addressed. The overall effectiveness of services for children and young people in Newcastle is adequate.

Sustainable communities and transport

- 78** The Council has a clear vision for creating sustainable communities. The Council places a high value on regeneration, and has produced a new strategy which integrates the economic, social and environmental dimensions with a vision of the city in 2021. The local economy is developing but substantial challenges remain for the Council and its partners around skill levels and educational achievements. There have been improvements in making the city greener and cleaner, but performance in the housing market and transport are mixed. The Council does demonstrate the ability to make various links between the different elements of these agendas, for example in prioritising external work to houses with poor energy ratings before internal improvements.
- 79** The Council's contribution to promoting a sustainable economy has had a mixed impact. The labour market continues to grow stronger if still performing below national average levels, with issues of worklessness a focus of the Newcastle Partnership. There have been improvements in the number of jobs in the city and VAT registered businesses over the last six years, but the economy is growing more slowly than the national economy. The Council has maintained focus on the more deprived areas, particularly through working with partnerships such as New Deal for Communities, and creating new structures to tackle worklessness in these areas. Progress on raising skill levels has so far been limited.
- 80** It is developing good partnerships in this area and can demonstrate solid achievements in the city centre. The Council has set up an innovative city centre partnership with the private sector which will allow the partnership to take the lead in managing the delivery of a wide range of services and initiatives. The Council is developing stronger links with the business sector at senior councillor and officer level, but this has yet to become a characteristic of the Council's culture which is clearly recognised by the entire business sector.
- 81** The Council is providing strong leadership to secure its ambitions for economic development. This includes close working with the regional Science Learning Centre North East to help develop a step change in science education and overall science culture in the region, and a proposed City Development Company.
- 82** Improving housing performance continues to be an important issue for the Council. Good progress is being made in dealing with housing for vulnerable groups. This includes a scheme with agencies working with young people to ensure a pathway into the housing market for those in need, including teenage mothers. The Supporting People strategy is effectively addressing diversity, and funding has provided 202 bed spaces for people with learning disabilities. Homelessness has been substantially reduced since 2003/04, from 1,082 to 610 in 2005/06.
- 83** The approach being taken to meet the decent homes standards followed tenant consultation, and enables most homes to have either internal or external improvement during the first three-year period, based on a stock condition survey. Tenant satisfaction has also increased because of this method, and around 8,000 homes have benefited from this work.

- 84 The energy efficiency levels of dwellings are in the worst 25 per cent. Partnership working such as Newcastle Warm Zone is helping to address the city's low energy efficiency levels. The approach being taken towards the decent homes standards which allows a quicker focus on external works where they are needed, and is helping to improve the relatively poor insulation qualities of much of the stock.
- 85 Challenging issues remain around the lack of affordable housing, which has been an increasing problem in the last two years as the housing market has substantially changed from one of previously low demand. The housing strategy has a clear priority to address this issue, with a very challenging target for 6,000 new affordable homes by 2021, and explicit proposals of how many are to be provided.
- 86 A range of activity is contributing to an improving and more sustainable environment, but with mixed success. The Council has clear and challenging aims for waste management, but there is a lack of realistic targets and milestones, and quantification of resources in the Newcastle Waste Management Strategy of April 2005. More realistic targets and the identification of resources to achieve them are being put in place by the Council. Recycling performance has improved, but the targets for 2006/07 are likely to be missed, as is the target of only landfilling 50 per cent of household waste. Neighbourhood response teams are improving cleanliness across the city, and five parks have achieved Green Flag status.
- 87 The Council acts as a community leader by example in several environmental areas. It is piloting a methodology for implementing the climate change agenda for its own organisation. It has earned Eco-Management and Audit Scheme recognition in one department and is rolling it out across the Council. A Green Travel Plan for the Council is in place, aimed at reducing staff commuter journeys by reducing car park passes by 24 per cent over three years. Such initiatives increase the likelihood of the Council being able to persuade other organisations to follow suit.
- 88 The Council's transport ambitions are clearly set out in the Local Transport Plan which is a holistic strategy to improve accessibility to key services - healthcare, employment, food retail and education - across Tyneside. It aligns with wider council aims and priorities such as assisting social inclusion for those without access to a car.
- 89 The Council plays a key role in tackling public transport issues, many of which remain stubborn. There have been significant improvements in the usage of the Metro which offset the decline in bus usage, which has been at an annual rate of three per cent during the past decade. The Council has worked with partners to provide schemes to support public transport, such as the use of alternative fuelled vehicles and further development of bus super-routes. Funding has been received from the Transport Innovative Fund to research effective measures for managing traffic growth and reducing congestion. Links with other agendas are clear, such as community safety through secured car parks. Plans to reinvigorate the metro are the key to the longer term goal of reducing congestion, but have yet to be agreed by government.

Safer and stronger communities

- 90** Newcastle has partnerships at city and local level aimed at reducing crime and building safer communities. The main city-wide group is Safe Newcastle, part of the Newcastle Partnership. There is good evidence of significant progress, except in tackling alcohol abuse and developing a strategic approach to community cohesion.
- 91** The Council has clear priorities for community safety derived from both the Newcastle Plan and the Council's corporate plan. Extra resources have been committed in recent years, including funding aimed at reducing domestic violence and anti-racial crime. Crime levels have fallen overall by 11 per cent across the city during the last three years, and the Council's neighbourhood approach is making significant inroads into local community safety problems. Some areas, such as domestic burglary, have reduced by even more, (by 19 per cent between 2003/04 and 2005/06), and Newcastle is amongst the best areas in reducing violent crime.
- 92** The Council is seen as a community leader in this area by its partners and is working well with them to reduce crime. A comprehensive database and analysis has been undertaken and shared with partners. There are joint partnerships and working groups set up to tackle particular issues. An example is one formed to draw together transport agencies to work with Northumbria Police and the Council to tackle crime and the fear of crime on public transport. Such involvement increases the likelihood of ownership of such initiatives and the sustainability of their impact in increasing community safety.
- 93** The Council does not have robust processes in place for monitoring and evaluating all its initiatives in this area, nor is it always clear how success will be measured. Similarly there is no target for implementing secured by design principles in refurbishing housing schemes. Without clarity about outcomes it will be difficult to show effective use of resources, or to evaluate against other priorities in these areas.
- 94** The Council has yet to involve fully all its services in contributing to improving community safety. Although there are some good examples in areas such as improving street lighting through a PFI scheme, section 17 of the Crime & Disorder Act 1998 has yet to be fully implemented throughout the Council. Current service plans do not integrate its requirements to ensure compliance, although this will be a requirement for 2007/08 plans. Until this is done the Council will not be as effective as it should be in reducing crime and promoting community safety through all its services.
- 95** There has been good progress on dealing with anti-social behaviour. The Council and partners have adopted an anti-social behaviour strategy promoting a balanced, proportionate, community orientated approach. The impact has been that fewer residents see vandalism, graffiti and deliberate damage as a problem in 2005/06 than in 2003/04. These improvements are recognised by residents in the annual residents' survey, and the percentage of those feeling safe in Newcastle has risen from 81 per cent in 2003/04 to 83 per cent in 2005/06.

- 96 There has been good progress in tackling drugs. The misuse and harm caused by drugs has been reduced through effective interventions, accessible treatment and support. This includes a scheme to train people in the statutory and voluntary sectors to be better able to intervene or appropriately refer users to treatment, and over 1,400 people attended such training in 2005/06. In 2005/06 the Council exceeded by nine per cent the annual target agreed with the National Treatment Agency with 1,477 drug users accessing treatment services. The Council is also developing a good approach to meeting the accommodation needs of drug and alcohol users.
- 97 Work on tackling alcohol abuse is developing. A regional strategic approach has been agreed by partners in the North East, with the Council taking an active role. Alcohol use and its impact is a shared concern of Safe Newcastle and Newcastle Wellbeing and Health partnership. While there are various joint initiatives the partnerships have only recently agreed to develop a strategy together to provide a framework for existing work and future developments. Once this is in place with detailed integrated actions it will enable the Council and its partners to tackle effectively all the problems associated with alcohol misuse.
- 98 The Council performance in improving safety in Newcastle is variable. Road safety has deteriorated. For the period 2003/05 its rate of improvement puts it in the third lowest quartile for killed or seriously injured (KSI) and the worst quartile for improving the numbers slightly injured. It has implemented safe routes to schools, improved pedestrian crossing facilities and piloted 20 mph zones, and the numbers of child KSIs has markedly reduced. The number of fires per 1,000 dwellings is the highest on Tyneside. There is a range of initiatives aimed at reducing this level, including an arson task force. Increasing domestic fire safety and reduced arson is an outcome in the Quality of Life section of the LAA, but all these initiatives have yet to secure a significant reduction.
- 99 The Council's approach to the resilience agenda is generally effective. Considerable progress has been made by the agencies, including the Council, involved in developing a Tyne and Wear response to the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. The Council's emergency plan is linked to its business continuity plans and co-ordinated with the other Tyne and Wear authorities, and it has developed a framework for corporate and service business continuity plans, and there are up to date risk assessments. The Council has validated emergency arrangements. It is actively promoting business continuity in the budget and is developing a community impact assessment, but the impact on the wider business community has so far been limited.

- 100** The Council does not have a strategic approach to community cohesion. There are existing plans such as a race equality scheme and disability strategy which have clear objectives and good policies and procedures that are in line with best practice. Existing plans are now being complemented and consolidated by a new social inclusion strategy, which builds on the foundations of the 2005 Equality Plan. The Council has introduced a conflict management programme which has been delivered to 82 frontline staff from partner agencies aimed at reducing racial tensions and improving community cohesion. The completion of the social cohesion strategy would help to integrate and direct the range of activities in this area, principally work on equalities, community cohesion, and personal social exclusion.

Healthier communities

- 101** There are major health issues facing people in Newcastle. Although there has been some success in improving outcomes, health outcomes are still below other authorities. The Council and PCT belong to the Choosing Health Spearhead Group for authorities that have the highest level of ill-health and deprivation in England. They are expected to set tougher targets and make faster progress than national rates to reduce the health equalities gap. Joint working, particularly with the Primary Care Trust (PCT) is improving. The Council is developing an overall strategic approach to improving health for the local population and is at an early stage.
- 102** Despite improvements in a number of areas, the gap in a number of key health indicators between people in Newcastle and nationally is still significant. There have been improvements in male life expectancy and mortality (under 75 years) from cancer, but the gap compared with the national average has widened. Female life expectancy at birth in Newcastle is still less than the national average (79.8 years compared with 80.9 years), but has been improving since 1997/99 at a faster rate. Improvements are greater for those living in the most deprived parts of the city. Alcohol abuse (binge drinking) among young people is very high and the city has the highest mortality rate from chronic liver disease among males nationally. Obesity rates are rising for all groups, particularly for children and young people. Teenage conception rates are still in the worst nationally. Overall this means that people's health is not improving faster than national rates.
- 103** The Council is at an early stage in developing an overall strategic approach to improving the health and well-being of the people of Newcastle. It is leading on a Health Improvement Strategy, which is at consultation draft stage, and is intended to provide a strategic approach to addressing the issues facing the area. There is a range of existing or developing but the various initiatives are not adequately prioritised within a strategic framework, and their targets and objectives are not always aligned; for example the LPSA2 targets for reducing teenage pregnancies are not in the recent Teenage Pregnancy Strategy. Nor are connections always made explicit between different programmes of interventions, such as between teenage conception and high alcohol abuse and low educational attainment. In consequence the impact of such initiatives has been lessened.

- 104** The Council is improving its cross-cutting work in health across departments and with partners. This includes targeting of more vulnerable groups based on good information about health inequalities. Sure Start and Children's Centres provide easy access to midwives and health visitors and offer good and well attended support sessions, including baby massage and free baby swimming sessions. The Council uses its regulatory powers to support the health agenda, such as targeting establishments that sell cigarettes to the under 16 year olds, and in licensing of public houses. The Council also designated 2006 as the 'Year of Exercise and Sport' and recent evaluation is now showing a range of positive outcomes from the initiative. The Warm Zone programme was initially focused on poorer areas where fuel poverty was known to be higher.
- 105** The Council with partners is taking action on specific health requirements of diverse groups. As a result of consultation, the Health and Wellbeing partnership made mental health a local priority. There are examples of good practice, such as a BME Mental Wellbeing Project has been developed with innovative ways of working and engaging with the local BME communities to tackle the stigma of mental health. A community development worker and mental health worker will be linking with the city-wide BME Primary Care Mental Health Worker to provide an overall service, using research to demonstrate the effectiveness of the project and undertaking focussed work which is culturally sensitive.

Older people

- 106** Having accepted that there is no overall strategic approach to meeting the needs of older people, the Council is now putting in place a strategy for an ageing population that will consolidate the various current strands of activity. The effectiveness of partnership working is mixed, although consultation is well developed. The Council engages well with older people, but significant impacts from the Elders Council that recognisably improve the quality of life for older people have yet to be delivered. There are some gaps in the range of services that support independence for more vulnerable people.
- 107** The impact of an ageing population in Newcastle has not been fully integrated into all plans. Currently just over 30 per cent of the population is aged 50-plus; by 2028 this will have risen to 32.3 per cent, and those over 85 will have increased by 57 per cent. These figures will include a growing number of BME older people. The impact of these increases has not been recognised in all current plans, such as the Newcastle Plan, or key Council's strategies such as the MTFP or corporate plan. As a result, the impact on all local services and the resultant financial implications has not yet been assessed.

- 108** The Council does not yet have a strategic approach for older people in place. It is consulting on a draft Quality of Life strategy for an ageing population. This provides a comprehensive set of ambitions for older people from the age of 50 years, and recognises that services currently focus on the more vulnerable older people. The Council is now starting to develop services for those less vulnerable people, such as adult learning and skills. The strategy will provide the necessary framework to help maximise the impact of services and initiatives for older people.
- 109** The Council's approach to older people throughout its services is not consistent. There are examples of good practice in some service areas. The relationship between the Elders Council, social services, and leisure services is strong, with a part-time physical activity co-ordinator being seconded to the Elders Council to advise and develop this area which gives ownership of the initiative to older people. Targeted work through partners such as Age Concern has led to improved take-up of benefits among older people from BME communities. Work on issues in housing, such as life-time homes standards, have yet to be developed and implemented. As a result, opportunities for collaborative working are not being maximised to address the needs of people aged over 50 years.
- 110** Services for some vulnerable older people are not improving adequately. The Commission for Social Care Inspectorate (CSCI) raised concerns around the reduction in number of older people helped to live at home and the percentage of assessments of older people which begin within 48 hours of first contact as this is significantly below comparators. CSCI also raised concerns over the delay in appointing a Director of Adult Services. The Council's rating for adult social care was reduced from three stars in 2005 to two stars in 2006.
- 111** The effectiveness of partnership working is mixed. There are good examples of partnership working around consultation and with fire and police services in the provision of support to vulnerable people. Joint commissioning arrangements are in place between the PCT and the Council which have been successful at avoiding delayed transfers of care; this has resulted in no delayed discharges from hospital in the last quarter. On the other hand, the Single Assessment Process has not been implemented which would bring together health and social care referral processes. As a result opportunities to utilise resources and skills jointly are not being maximised.
- 112** The Council has a good track record in engaging with older people. It was a pilot for the Better Government for Older People and has set up and is building the capacity of an Elders Council through funding from the Quality of Life Partnership. The Elders Council has over 1,150 members and eight active working groups on key topics such as housing, health, and social care. There is a range of consultation arrangements with older people but many are focussed on traditional care needs. The Quality of Life Partnership is used to gain input to the budget each year, and for involvement on major strategies, such as the regeneration, housing, and engagement strategies in 2006. This has led to meaningful engagement and a sense of being valued by those older people involved. Yet its impact on involving a wider range of older people, including those from BME and other hard to reach groups has been more limited.

Children and young people

- 113 The overall effectiveness of services for children and young people in Newcastle is adequate. The city of Newcastle faces the very considerable challenge of historically low outcomes for children and young people, linked to profound deprivation in some parts of the city; outcomes are improving and are adequate overall. Children and young people appear safe. The capacity of the Council and its partners to improve further the outcomes for children and young people is good.
- 114 The shared ambition for children and young people is prominent in the Community Strategy and the emerging local area agreement, and is articulated well in the Newcastle Children and Young People Plan (NCYPP). Council officers, elected councillors, partners and stakeholders are clear what needs to be done and the partnership, led by the Council, is transforming services for children and young people. The leadership provided by the Director of children's services is good. Value for money is adequate overall and there is a good track record of budget management across both social services and education. Performance management is adequate; a comprehensive high level framework is in place which includes some reporting across partners. The involvement of children and young people in monitoring the performance of services is at an early stage. The capacity of the Council and the local area to improve further is good. This is demonstrated by strong professional leadership and shared determination across the partnership to address underachievement; significant and sometimes rapid improvements in outcomes and services; prompt and focused actions to address weaknesses, resulting in improvement for children and young people; and an ambitious and well constructed programme for change to deliver these improvements.
- 115 Specific multi-agency strategies are being targeted at problem areas such as teenage pregnancy. Cross-agency work on safeguarding has been strengthened through the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) and the implementation of a co-ordinated and strategic approach to early intervention and prevention through the alignment of preventive services at locality level has begun. The quality of early years and childcare provision is good and educational attainment has started to improve. Across most services there is evidence of good practice and successful initiatives on the ground. However, many developments are still at an early stage and have not yet had time to demonstrate improved outcomes for the most vulnerable groups. Partnerships between agencies have improved and work is underway to map and plan provision efficiently at local level; this includes the review of the high number of out of authority placements for looked after children and children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

- 116** Overall, outcomes across the city are below those in similar local authorities and nationally; there is increasing evidence of improvement, although some of this is recent and dependent on where children and families live or go to school. Most health indicators are in line with the average for similar areas and nationally; however, the numbers of mothers smoking, the rate of teenage pregnancy and childhood obesity rates remain high. Children and young people report that they feel safe in school and in their immediate neighbourhood, though some are concerned about racism and bullying. Those at risk of significant abuse or neglect receive the protection they should.
- 117** The work of the Council in helping children and young people to enjoy their education and recreation and to achieve well is adequate. The attainment of young people at the ages of 11 and the proportion of 16 year olds attaining five higher grade GCSEs have improved significantly though standards of attainment and the progress made by children and young people remain variable across key stages and across some groups. Good work has taken place to improve the attendance of pupils who don't attend school frequently enough and to reduce the numbers of young people temporarily excluded from school. However, the numbers of children excluded permanently from school remain high and some do not receive their full entitlement to education.
- 118** Children and young people are generally supported well in developing emotionally and socially. The Council and its partners place a high priority on consultation with and responding to the views of children and young people when designing services for them. Arrangements for involving young people in local democratic processes and links with elected councillors are evolving. Support for young carers has improved recently but there is no provision for them to socialise together in groups away from their caring responsibilities. Agencies are beginning to work together to adopt consistent approaches to managing and reducing levels of anti-social behaviour in schools and in the community.
- 119** Most young people are increasingly supported to achieve economic well-being. Childcare is good, accessible for most parents and carers, and its availability is improving. Parents have very good opportunities to develop skills for work and to help their children learn. However, there is still a high proportion of workless homes. The 14 to 19 strategy supports increasingly effective collaboration between providers through the integration of plans between institutions and agencies for those aged over the age of 16. Some well supported strategies to improve housing for young people are beginning to have an impact but there is still a shortage of suitable housing for families. Advice and guidance is effective for most young people. Support for young people leaving care is good. Specialist provision for learners with disabilities, and planning for their transition to adulthood are good, but there is insufficient vocational provision for those over 18 and few participate in work-based learning.

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 Newcastle City Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 23 January to 1 February 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.