

# Environment Inspection

**South Cambridgeshire District Council**

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## Service Inspection

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

Audit Commission service inspections should:

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

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

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

## Summary

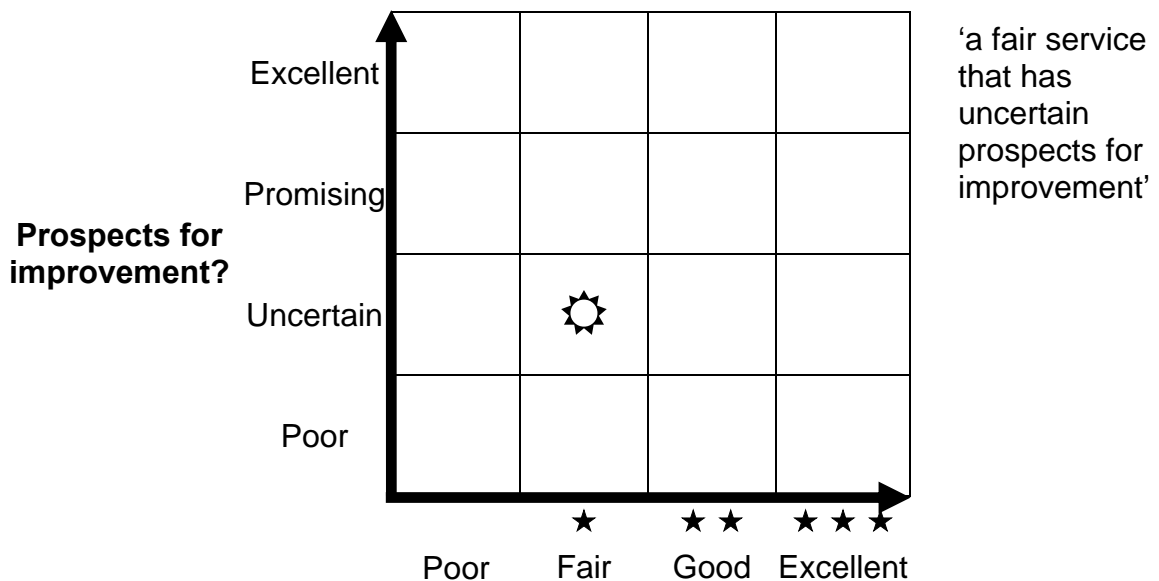
- 1 South Cambridgeshire is predominantly rural covers an area of 900 square kilometres which surrounds the city of Cambridge. The district contains no town but has a number of smaller settlements and 101 parishes. The district is subject to significant future challenges arising from the major development pressures as a consequence of the economic growth of the area and the major housing growth proposed. The district population increased faster than regional and national averages between 1991 and 2001 and is projected to increase by a further 33 per cent by 2016.
- 2 The Council has identified four objectives, each underpinned by a vision, for the next five to ten years. These are: high quality, accessible, value for money services; quality village life; a sustainable future for South Cambridgeshire; and a better future through partnership. Underpinning the longer term corporate objective are three priorities for the period up until 2007/08 which are: to improve customer service; to achieve successful, sustainable new communities at Northstowe and other major new settlements; and to increase the supply of affordable housing.
- 3 In July 2004, the Audit Commission published a CPA category for South Cambridgeshire District Council. This assessment categorised the Council as 'fair'. A progress assessment in December 2005 found that performance on key indicators had declined but that the decline had been halted.
- 4 The inspection examined development control (including enforcement and appeals); planning policy; other sub sections of planning such as design and conservation; and planning administration. The service was judged against the Audit Commission's new key lines of enquiry (KLOE) and methodology set out in 'Approach to service inspections' published in May 2005. We concluded that overall, planning services at South Cambridgeshire District Council are 'fair' with 'uncertain' prospects for improvement.
- 5 The service is enabling development that meets local, regional and national priorities - for example the creation of new settlements, affordable housing and sustainability. A constructive approach is being taken to the growth agenda to ensure benefits to the local community and the environment are maximised whilst adverse impacts are minimised. It is encouraging high quality development and specialist advice is available; and key planning policy documents are being prepared to guide and control future development.
- 6 However, there has been poor performance on the speed of determining planning applications. User satisfaction has declined and there is an absence of information and written guidance for applicants who may not be represented by professional agents. Users have not been engaged to inform service delivery. There has been little training of councillors on specific planning issues and the public are not allowed to address the planning committee.

- 7 The service has uncertain prospects for improvement because there are serious capacity issues - a constraint which is unlikely to reduce in the medium term. The service faces a huge planning workload which existing staffing resources are striving to manage, but there is little contingency for additional pressures. Service and workforce planning are not being used effectively to help the service meet current and future challenges, and there is no clear succession planning. A significant number of key planning posts are funded through external, short term grants and there are no clear plans for when such funding ceases. Senior strategic management capacity is also about to be reduced through the reduction in the number of strategic directors. It is not clear that the council has the strategic skills or capacity to deal with the challenges arising from the growth agenda.
- 8 However, the quality and commitment of planning officers is recognised both internally and by external stakeholders. Councillors and senior officers recognise the pivotal role that planning services must play in the achievement of corporate objectives. Performance in key performance indicators has improved and the council is at the forefront of preparing its new policy framework to guide future developments. There is effective partnership working and investment in new technology to improve the efficiency and accessibility of the planning service.
- 9 To improve the service the Commission makes five recommendations to ensure it has the capacity necessary. These are: improve user focus; target resources in accordance with priorities; improve value for money; and improve the effectiveness and capacity of committees and councillors.

## Scoring the service

- 10 The service was judged against the Audit Commission's new key lines of enquiry (KLOE) and methodology set out in 'Approach to service inspections' published in May 2005.
- 11 We have assessed South Cambridgeshire District Council as providing a 'fair', one-star service that has uncertain prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

**Table 1 Scoring chart<sup>1</sup>**



**A good service?**

*Source: Audit Commission*

- 12 The service is a fair, one-star service because:
- the service is enabling development that meets local, regional and national priorities - for example the creation of new settlements, affordable housing and sustainability;
  - a constructive approach is being taken to the growth agenda to ensure benefits to the local community and the environment are maximised whilst adverse impacts are minimised;

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

## 8 Environment Inspection | Scoring the service

- high quality development is encouraged and specialist advice is available; and
- key planning policy documents have been and are being prepared to guide and control future development. The Council is at the forefront nationally in preparations for a Local Development Framework.

However:

- over the past three years has been poor performance on the speed of determining planning applications and between 2001/02 and 2003/04 user satisfaction has declined;
- there is limited, and not readily accessible information and written guidance for applicants who may often not be represented by professional agents;
- users have not been engaged to inform service delivery. There is no regular user forum or user charter setting out the level of service users can expect to receive;
- there has been little training of councillors of specific planning issues to ensure they remain up to date on policy interpretation, case law and application of material considerations;
- the public are not allowed to address the planning committee; and
- until very recently the website has compared poorly to many other councils.

### 13 The service has uncertain prospects for improvement because:

- there are serious capacity issues, arising from the Council's overall financial position. A constraint which is unlikely to reduce in the medium term;
- the local context means that the service faces significant challenges which existing staffing resources are striving to manage, but there is little contingency for additional pressures. Effective service and workforce planning are not being used to ensure service has the capacity to maintain the service and deal with future challenges. There is no clear succession planning;
- external funding is being used to fund a significant number of essential planning posts but there is no exit strategy to continue funding these posts when the funds cease - especially the planning delivery grant which ends in 2008;
- the expected benefits in terms of efficiency and effectiveness of the 'Transformation Project' and associated business process re-engineering are not clearly defined;
- senior strategic management capacity is about to be reduced through the reduction in the number of strategic directors. It is not clear that the council has the strategic skills or capacity to deal with the challenges arising from the growth agenda; and
- there is no clear understanding of the value for money that services provide.



However:

- the quality and commitment of planning officers is recognised both internally and by external stakeholders;
- councillors and senior officers appreciate the pivotal role that planning services must play in the achievement of corporate objectives;
- speed of determining planning applications has improved in 2005/06 (according to unaudited data) and the Council is taking a lead nationally in the production of a local development framework;
- there is good collaborative working within the Council and with external partners; and
- there has been significant investment in new technology to improve the efficiency and accessibility of the planning service.

## Recommendations

- 14 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, councils need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the council. In addition we identify the approximate costs<sup>2</sup> and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context the inspection team recommends that the council should do the following.

### ***Recommendation***

*R1 Ensure the service has the necessary short, medium and long term capacity by:*

- undertaking regular reviews of the skills available and those required;*
- reducing reliance on external or short term funding to support key posts;*
- exploring alternative approaches to service delivery that build capacity and increase value for money; and*
- ensuring there is appropriate capacity at senior management level to undertake strategic, long term planning associated with the growth agenda.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- reduction of the risk of capacity issues affecting the delivery, performance and improvement of the service in the future, especially in relation to the growth agenda;
- ensure the Council has skills and resources needed to meet changing circumstances;
- ensure the necessary strategic senior management capacity is available; and
- Improve the effectiveness and efficient use of resources.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be commenced by September 2006.

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

**Recommendation**

*R2 Improve user focus by:*

- *establishing regular and ongoing engagement with service users to inform service delivery;*
- *ensure service standards reflect the needs of users, that they include all key elements of the service; and are monitored to ensure delivery;*
- *make available written advice and guidance specifically on householder and other minor forms of development;*
- *ensure service and information is available to those who do not have access to IT; and*
- *review committee arrangements to increase opportunity to for public engagement in decision-making.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- a service that is tailored to user needs and provides equality of access;
- clarity about the level of service users can expect;
- improved guidance and advice; and
- higher levels of satisfaction with the service.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by April 2007.

**Recommendation**

*R3 Ensure resources are directed in accordance with priorities and areas of greatest need by:*

- *identifying service activities, outcomes delivered and resources used against local and national priorities; and*
- *producing clear, outcome focussed targets linked to local and national priorities.*

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- resources (human and financial) are targeted to priorities in order to maximise outcomes.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by April 2007.

**Recommendation**

*R4 That a systematic approach be taken to improving value for money by:*

- *managers and councillors using cost information alongside performance information to challenge and drive up performance;*
- *using the comparative data to identify areas in which performance is low compared to that achieved in other councils; and*
- *using benchmarking with other high performing councils and councils that have significantly improved their performance, by April 2007.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- that improved value for money will be secured by the service; and
- improved performance.

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with X costs. This should be implemented by April 2007.

**Recommendation**

*R5 Improve effectiveness and capacity of committees and councillors by:*

- *further regular reviewing the delegation agreement;*
- *providing ongoing, regular and mandatory training for all councillors involved in making decisions on planning matters; and*
- *clarification of officer and councillor roles to ensure appropriate separation of strategic and operational functions.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- ensuring the skills and knowledge of councillors is kept up to date to enable decision-making to be consistent, fair and transparent; and
- to optimise the capacity of officers and councillors to improve performance and value for money.

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs. This should be implemented by April 2007.

# Report

## Context

### The locality

- 15 South Cambridgeshire is predominantly rural covers an area of 900 square kilometres which surrounds the city of Cambridge. The district contains no town but has a number of smaller settlements and 101 parishes. The majority of villages have populations of fewer than 1,000 people. The district is subject to significant future challenges arising from the major development pressures as a consequence of the economic growth of the area and the major housing growth proposed.
- 16 South Cambridgeshire is in an economic sub-region with a buoyant economy driven by the high tech and biotech sectors. The district provides bases for a large number of these businesses with the administration, financial and service sectors also being major employers.
- 17 The district population increased faster than regional and national averages between 1991 and 2001, growing by 7.1 per cent to reach 131,000 people in 2001. The population is projected to increase by a further 33 per cent by 2016 since regional planning guidance and the structure plan identifies the district for further major growth with the largest increase in the number of dwellings (1,175 units per year) of any district in the whole of the eastern region. The expansion includes the creation of a new settlement called Northstowe which will be the first town in the District of approximately 8,000 dwellings.
- 18 The population is predominately white British (93 per cent). There is a substantial, but fluctuating traveller population of approximately 140 families who form the largest ethnic minority in the district (around 1.7 per cent).
- 19 Unemployment was 0.9 per cent compared with regional and national averages (2.0 and 2.6 per cent respectively - April 2006). Average weekly earnings are high at £464 in 2003, again better than regional and national averages. Levels of educational attainment are also good. The percentage of 16 to 60 year olds with poor literacy and numeracy skills is approximately seven per cent below the national averages. The national deprivation index (2000) places South Cambridgeshire as 345th out of 354.
- 20 The band D council tax in the district for 2006/07 is £97.48 which is the ninth lowest of all district councils.
- 21 The District has 2,700 listed buildings, 84 conservation areas, 4,300 archaeological sites and 11 historic parks and gardens.

## The council

- 22 In July 2004, the Audit Commission published a CPA category for South Cambridgeshire District Council. This assessment categorised the Council as 'fair'. A progress assessment in December 2005 found that performance on key indicators had declined but that the decline had been halted.
- 23 The council comprises 57 elected councillors. At the time of the inspection the political make-up of the council was 22 conservatives, 20 liberal democrats, 13 independents, 2 labour and 1 vacancy. The council has adopted the leader and cabinet model of governance and as the council has no overall control the cabinet includes councillors from all the political groupings. There is a scrutiny and overview committee and a standards committee is in place.
- 24 The Council was capped in 2005/06 and had to find savings of £2.6 million which represented approximated 20 per cent of the total budget.
- 25 The council's net revenue expenditure for 2004/05 was £10.9 million. It had a capital programme of £13.1 million.
- 26 At the time of the inspection a senior management restructure was underway to reduce the number of directors from 4 to 2. This is one element of the ongoing Transformation Project which is designed to provide a more inclusive management structure with greater involvement of second and third tier officers in strategy and policy development. The current Director of Finance has been appointed on a one-year contract from 1 July 2006 to replace the existing Chief Executive who leaves in June. The post of Director of Development Services is being deleted and the current post holder retires on 30 June 2006.

## The council's planning service

- 27 The service under review consists of:
- Development Control (including Enforcement and Appeals);
  - Planning Policy;
  - Other sub sections of Planning such as Design and Conservation; and
  - Planning administration.
- 28 The inspection did not include exclude specific examination of:
- Building Control;
  - Searches; or
  - Strategic Housing.

- 29 The council was identified by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) as a Planning Standards Authority in 2005/06 and 2006/07 poor performance in dealing with 'major' planning applications. As such, the service has been subject to a detailed examination by the ODPM of the operational aspects of development control. This inspection has not repeated this work but rather has examined and reports on how development control contributes to: access, customer care, user and/or community focus; the delivery of corporate, regional and national priorities; and value for money.
- 30 The net cost of the service in 2005/06 was £2,225,775. This is a decrease of 9.3 per cent from the previous year due to cuts imposed due to rate capping. The council was awarded £507,902 Planning Delivery Grant in the 2005/06 allocation.
- 31 The service employs 30.25 FTE staff in development control (including enforcement and appeals). Majors team 8FTE, 8 FTE in policy, 6.5 FTE conservation and design and is supported by an administration and support team of 6 FTE.

## How good is the service?

### What has the service aimed to achieve?

**32** The Council has identified four objectives, each underpinned by a vision, for the next five to ten years. These are:

- high quality, accessible, value for money services;
- quality village life;
- a sustainable future for South Cambridgeshire; and
- a better future through partnership.

**33** Underpinning the longer term corporate objective are three priorities for the period up until 2007/08 which are:

- to improve customer service;
- to achieve successful, sustainable new communities at Northstowe and other major new settlements; and
- to increase the supply of affordable housing.

These link directly to the planning service.

**34** Linked to the proposed housing growth in the district the Council has identified a number of issues that it will face in the next ten to 15 years. Many of these impact on the planning service and include:

- achieving planned growth in a way, which results in sustainable communities;
- increasing the supply of affordable and key worker housing to meet demand;
- retaining the valued rural character of the area and quality of village life, in terms of environment and community life in a time of change;
- sustainable transport provision;
- addressing the infrastructure deficit (estimated at £2 billion) facing the sub-region as a result of previous and planned growth; and
- meeting travellers' needs.

**35** Each corporate priority has annual milestones identified with a lead officer. In 2005/06 there were 105 corporate milestones set out in the 2005 Performance Plan. Progress against each milestones is reported quarterly through management team to Cabinet. For 2006/07 the number of milestones is reduced to 28. Performance indicators linked to priorities are identified in the annual performance plan together with some local performance indicators. Targets are set as part of the service planning process and are included in the appropriate service plan. Not all targets are supported by outward or user focussed outcomes that the people living, working or visiting the District would recognise.



- 36 The planning service should be a key contributor in helping the Council deliver its objectives and priorities. The service operates largely within a statutory framework and development is guided and controlled through policies contained in the development plans. The principal plan which sets the planning policies for the district is the South Cambridgeshire Local Plan which underpins the regional planning guidance for the East of England (RPG 6) and the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Structure Plan. The local plan was adopted in February 2004 and is up to date. It is saved and will remain the development plan for the area until replaced by the new policy documents referred to below. The plan has been informed by local and regional data and takes into account recent national planning guidance such as that on housing (PPG 3) and transport (PPG13). The national and local priority of sustainability is addressed with a variety of policies - for example to secure energy conservation (HG22) and sustainable forms of travel (TP1). The plan is supported by supplementary planning guidance (SPG), development briefs and master plans to reflect changing needs or circumstances.
- 37 The service has acted very promptly in respect of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004. The Council is the most advanced in the East of England and one of the most advanced nationally progressing the new policy documents. The new local development scheme was submitted on time and the service is on target to meet all the milestones set. Given the significant growth agenda and with the agreement of the Government Office the service has prioritised the preparation of six development plan documents (DPDs) which include the core strategy, development control and site specific policies and three area action plans. Together these set out the key planning policies to influence and control future development and they contain policies that reflect local, regional and national priorities. The documents were subject to consultation in 2005 and submitted to the Secretary of State in January 2006 for public examination and anticipated approval later in 2006 and early 2007. Due to the focus on ensuring the key policy documents are in place as soon as possible, with the agreement of the Government Office in approving the local development scheme (LDS), the Council took the decision not to prepare a statement of community involvement before proceeding with plan-making. However, the DPDs have been subject to a wide range of consultation with the public, local interest groups and statutory consultees (more than is necessary to meet the minimum requirements of the 2004 regulations).

## **Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users?**

### **Accessibility, customer care and community/user focus**

- 38 One of the Councils' objectives/priorities is to provide high quality, accessible, value for money services. The service has made a number of improvements to accessibility although some actions are new and benefits, to date, are limited. There are a number of areas where the services falls below that that is provided by other councils.

- 39 Audited performance indicators show 73 per cent of applicants were satisfied with the service in 2000/01. In 2004/05 this had fallen to 63 per cent. Whilst satisfaction levels declined nationally, satisfaction with the service fell more than other councils and put the council into the worst quartile.
- 40 The service has not actively sought to understand the needs of its users and the reasons for the relative dissatisfaction when compared to other planning services. There has been no ongoing engagement with users and the community to inform how the service is delivered. User feedback is not routinely used to shape and influence service and to improve satisfaction levels. There has been no regular planning agents forum.
- 41 There had been no published service charter setting out what users can expect. Corporate and service customer standards are being prepared but the draft service charter has not been informed by users views and does not include the level of service to be provided for some key activities. For example the time taken to deal with the approval of conditions which is reported to be taking many months and is increasing. A planning permission can not be implemented until information to satisfy conditions (materials, landscaping) has been approved. The fact that the service has improved the speed of determining the actual application does not assist the applicant if the time taken to approve of conditions is long or increasing.
- 42 Accessibility, other than electronically to the service is limited due to the rural nature of the area and lack of any centre town. This is a key reason why the Council established a customer contact centre nearby in St. Ives (Huntingdonshire). The centre is operated jointly with Cambridge County Council and is open 8am to 8pm (Monday to Saturday). The establishment of the centre coincided with the Council's office move from Cambridge to Cambourne and provides longer opening hours than previously available. The centre interface and operation with the service not yet fully developed or effective since this phase of the project only commenced in February 2006. To date benefits to users of the planning service are limited. The planning service does not provide routine access to an officer out of normal office hours, or have regular surgeries to provide a service to those unable to get to the main offices in Cambourne but officers do hold meetings out side normal working hours where necessary. The contact centre has access to a 'planning expert system' that is increasingly being used to answer routine questions. There is no duty planner and direct access to officers is difficult unless the person knows how the service is organised or has established working links with individual officers. This discriminates against individuals, such as local residents, who are not represented by professional agents and are often those most in need of advice.
- 43 There is limited, easily accessible written guidance or advice available specifically for householder and other small types of proposals which make up the majority of the applications. There is a district design guide and whilst there are some answers to 'frequently asked questions' on the Council's website there is no more specific locally written design advice on particular forms of householder development proposals such as conservatories, house and roof extensions and satellite dishes.

The design guide is not easily found on the website. Consequently applicants for minor developments, who are often not assisted by professional agents, do not have easy access to clear written guidance to enable appropriate initial applications to be made. Published guidance that does exist is not displayed in the Council reception or other public buildings although it is on the website. As a consequence, users may be unaware that such information could assist them.

- 44 There is limited guidance on S106 obligations. Apart from affordable housing there is no detailed guidance on other contributions that may be required setting out the justification and methodology for calculating contributions. The provision of such guidance helps ensure developers are treated consistently and that the council does not miss opportunities and the that use of S106 is seen by the public and developers to be transparent, fair, and consistent.
- 45 Opportunity for public engagement in the determining of applications is limited. Planning committees are held during the day. This will exclude those unable to attend during working hours and the service has not asked users what their preferred time for the committee would be to enable them to attend. Applicants and third parties are not allowed to address the committee. This is an accepted procedure at most other councils and regarded as national good practice by the Local Government Association (LGA), the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) and Planning Officers Society.
- 46 The Planning committee may often last for a substantial part of the day with a number of small applications being reported due to the terms of the delegation agreement. This is not an effective use of officer or councillor time. However, the committees are well chaired with clear presentations, the quality of planning reports is good and technology used by officers so that councillors and the public can understand what is being discussed.
- 47 There is limited training of councillors in planning matters and it is not mandatory. The Council's record of training shows that in addition to induction training only three sessions have been held since 2003 including a briefing on planning and how to use the planning ICT package. Training is infrequent and does not include issues such as policy interpretation, briefing on case law and application of material considerations. Attendance is patchy with some councillors not attending any training. An annual councillor tour is conducted to view good and bad examples of development and appeal decisions are reviewed. Mandatory, ongoing training for all councillors involved in planning matters is recommended by national bodies such as the LGA and the RTPI. This boosts councillor skills and gives them greater knowledge of legislation, policy and material considerations in order to deliver appropriate decisions and inform policy making.
- 48 However, there are some strengths. The service is at the forefront of preparing its new planning policy documents and has undertaken a variety of consultation exercises to inform the emerging policies. A variety of methods have been used including exhibitions, questionnaires and use of the parishes councils. The service has established a constructive relationship with the traveller community and the existing and emerging policies contain policies to address their needs.

The service is working closely with external partners such as the Area Joint Committee (AJC) and the Joint Strategic Forum (JSF) to ensure the needs of the community are met, various strategies link together and the LDF becomes the spatial expression of the Community Strategy.

- 49 In 2004/05 the service scored 94 per cent for the planning service quality checklist which is in the best quartile. The checklist includes 16 criteria which refer to provision of guidance, pre-application advice, access to specialist design advice, development teams and electronic delivery. The score is commendable but it should be noted the inspection examines a wider range of criteria than that included in the indicator.
- 50 The councillors and officers have taken a constructive approach to dealing with the growth agenda to enable it to make the best of it for the area. Once the decisions for major growth had been made at regional level the service has sought to respond positively through engagement with partners and the community.
- 51 Officers within the service are keen and generally helpful. Advice given is usually constructive and consistent but there can be variations depending on the officer contacted. Pre-application negotiations are encouraged and specialist advice is available - for example on conservation issues such as thatching. There are some advice notes on procedures although some are quite general and those that do exist are not always readily on display.
- 52 There is effective cross departmental working on large development proposals and policy development. Development teams (a team of officers from relevant council departments and external organisations involved in pre-application discussions so that all issues are identified early) are used for large proposals - such as Cambourne. The planning and housing services jointly commissioned housing needs survey. Information held by other departments is used to inform policy - for example data from the housing needs survey has been used to determine local need and to inform the percentages and thresholds required to secure affordable housing within the villages.
- 53 There have been some recent improvements to the planning website. The national Pendleton survey of planning websites scores websites using 21 criteria, the higher the score the better the website. The survey indicates that out of 21 the council's website scored 15 in 2004, 12 in May 2005 and in December 2005 it rose to 18. The website now allows users to submit applications online; to view current applications and some of their plans, check progress of applications; to view policy, decision notices and submit comments on line. Whilst the website is now impressive the service appears to be putting undue reliance on ICT to improve the service and there are many aspects of the service that can not rely on ICT - for example provision of detailed site specific advice and there will be users who can not, or choose not to use ICT.

## Diversity

- 54 The service has some understanding of diversity issues and recognises the need to consult 'hard-to-reach groups' in order to inform policy and service delivery. BME groups represent a very small proportion of the population but the area contains a significant number of rural communities with limited public transport. The services uses a range of consultation techniques for example the website and local newsletters such as the quarterly South Cambs community magazine but relies, to an extent, on individuals coming forward voluntarily. Whilst the service is satisfied that it has effectively engaged with 'hard-to-reach groups' there remains the possibility that it will not reach individuals that have no access to IT, transport or for cultural reasons will not come forward voluntarily. The Council is not well advanced in terms of producing a Race Equality Scheme with draft only going out to public consultation in January 2006.
- 55 The needs of the traveller community are well understood and addressed. The service has established a constructive relationship with the traveller community who form the largest minority group of the population. The local plan contains policies that specifically address their needs - for example the provision of sites and the LDF includes plans to deal with the ongoing challenging traveller issues. It has also worked with the Ormaston Trust to prepare a CD Rom to help travellers access and use the service.
- 56 Many documents are provided in Plain English with other formats and languages available on request. There is a translation service available. However, it is less clear how the more detailed advice and policy documents, such as the core strategy are to be made available to those whose first language is not English or have visual impairments.
- 57 There is an understanding of the implications of the Human Rights Act. The Council has sought external legal advice with regard to human rights and officers and councillors are well briefed - especially in relation to the rights of the traveller community. The enforcement team are well informed and regular briefings are held. There is some general awareness of the implications of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) but the development control manual makes no mention of the need to ensure proposals take into account the needs of the disabled. There are ad hoc, rather than formal arrangements between planning and building control to ensure advice and guidance given by planning complies with the requirements of the DDA and other regulations such as those relating to means of escape, and energy conservation. However, the service is securing the provision of lifetime homes in new developments thereby allowing the occupants to remain in their homes as their needs change over time.

## Service outcomes for users and the community

- 58 We examined how the service delivers against the corporate priorities and objectives and national priorities.

**To achieve successful, sustainable new communities at Northstowe and other major new settlements**

- 59 Sustainability is a key corporate objective for the Council and the service has contributed to the delivery of sustainable developments and communities. In addition to the creation of the new large settlements mentioned below there are a number of other successful outcomes. Planning policy incorporates a focus on sustainability and there is an adopted biodiversity strategy and climate plan which will influence new developments. Existing developments such as Granta Park and Hixton provide green travel plans; the Wellcome Trust Genome Campus includes a wetland nature reserve with a management plan to 2010 and; the Council's own offices incorporate many sustainable features including energy efficiency measures.
- 60 S106 obligations have been secured to support sustainability as well as provide a wide range of social, community and leisure facilities to meet the needs arising from developments. Green travel plans, public transport, cycleways, allotments and recycling centres are some examples.
- 61 Sustainability is being promoted within and outside the Council. Specialist advice is provided by two officers. The Biodiversity Officer (Conservation section) and the Strategic Development Officer (Chief Executives Department) who performs a mainstreaming and cross-cutting role to uphold sustainability throughout the council. The Council has a Portfolio Holder with lead responsibility for sustainability and a group of councillors have formed a cross-party climate group intended to promote climate change and sustainability related issues. The group has initiated discussions at cabinet on climate change and led to informed debates on planning applications such as those for proposed wind developments in the area. A sustainability innovation fund of £269,000 (including in kind contributions from individual house builders) has been used to provide innovative and sustainable forms of new development such as at Arbury Park.
- 62 The service has successfully contributed to the creation of new settlements. Cambourne, is a new settlement of 3,300 dwellings which is partially completed. It contains two primary schools, a business park, and a wide range of social, community and leisure facilities secured through a S106 obligation. Although the original planning permission was granted in 1994 and therefore prior to the governments current emphasis on sustainability the service has nevertheless worked to ensure that sustainability has been incorporated into the development. For example, some housing includes solar power, photovoltaics and solar conservatories to enable heat to be stored in the roof and used to heat the house as required. A network of footpaths, cycleways and bridlepaths link the various parts of the settlement encouraging transport by means other than by car.

- 63 The service is currently considering an outline planning application for a new settlement of 8,000 known as Northstowe located to the north of Oakington. It has learnt from the experience of Cambourne and is working closely with other council departments and external organisations to secure a sustainable community. For example, the minimum size of the settlement required in order to support a secondary school and attract private social and leisure facilities to the settlement. Trigger points linked to a S106 will be revised to ensure contributions, such as community facilities, are completed at earlier stages of the development and the drafting of the agreements revised to make clearer what the developer is to provide. The draft Northstowe Area Action Plan which sets out the vision and development principles for the settlement includes specific policies relating to the retention, management and creation of biodiversity features and an integrated water strategy. Achieving high levels of energy and resource efficiency including the on-site generation of sustainable and renewable energy and waste minimisation and recycling will also be key elements of the design. Northstowe has been cited as 'sustainable, low carbon exemplar' in respect of climate change by the ODPM and organisations such as English Partnerships. A Cambridgeshire Guided Busway linking Northstowe, south Cambridge, Addenbrookes Hospital and Huntingdon is proposed to provide a frequent public transport.
- 64 The service is contributing to the effective use of land by securing high densities. In line with the national requirements of achieving densities between 30-50 dwellings per hectare a number of recent developments are achieving higher densities - for example Cambourne which provides an overall density of 58 dwelling per hectare. However, unaudited data provided by the service indicates the average density achieved over the preceding three years has been between 25 and 36 units per hectare although these results are skewed by some of these developments having been approved some years ago. Audited data suggests that the service has been less successful in reusing previously developed (brownfield) sites but there are local circumstances which have limited the availability of such land in the past. Data for 2004/05 shows only 33 per cent of new homes was built on brownfield sites which compared to other councils puts it in the worst quartile. However, the district has little brownfield land due to limited industrialisation and a focus on agriculture. New housing sites allocated in the structure plan include large brownfield sites such as those based on disused or current airfields. Therefore future housing, such as that at Northstowe will be on brownfield sites. Higher densities and use of brownfield sites is important to ensure greenfield (previously underdeveloped) sites is minimised to protect the character of the area.

#### **To increase the supply of affordable housing**

- 65 The service is helping delivery of housing to meet local need and enable people to remain in the area. The housing needs survey undertaken in 2002 identified a need for 884 affordable units per year. The planning service is not solely responsible for the provision of affordable housing but it is successfully contributing to its supply. Unaudited data provided by the Council indicates that the number of affordable houses built each year since 2002/03 has increased with 265 built in 2004/05 and further 284 in 2005/06.

Cambourne which is only partially complete will incorporate 27 per cent (650) affordable homes and provision is also being delivered in villages such as Bourne and Great Abington. The new proposed settlement at Northstowe will incorporate up to 50 per cent affordable housing with a mix of sizes and types of ownership.

- 66 Housing to meet specific needs of the community are being provided. Rural exception housing has been approved to provide housing to meet the specific needs of rural communities. Over the same period 57 key worker units have been built and two developments for those with learning difficulties.
- 67 Housing needs of the traveller community up to date and has been used to inform emerging planning policy. The travellers housing need survey undertaken in 2005 identified the need for an additional 170 - 220 pitches over the next five years. The district contains a number of authorised traveller sites and the service has established a constructive relationship with the community in order to respond to their needs.

### **A better future through partnership**

- 68 The service and Council recognise that partnership working is key to successfully delivery the significant growth in the area. There are a number of examples where service has worked well in partnership to secure developments that meet the needs of the community and enhance the environment.
- 69 Due in part to the Council's record of working in partnership the government has not established an urban development corporation to deal with the development growth in the area. Instead Cambridge Horizons was established and funded by the ODPM. It includes seven project boards with the Council leading some, and others being led by the City Council. There are joint projects such as work on preparing county wide information on S106 requirements which will form a supplementary planning document. Cambridge Horizons is currently funding five to six officers within the Council.
- 70 The development of Cambourne involved close working with other departments within the Council such as housing and community services to identify and deliver housing and local services that meet the needs of the new community. For example Comberton Village College provides secondary education for those living in Cambourne and funds secured through the S106 obligation were used to expand the college. Liaison with local groups and the residents is informing decisions about the provision of social and leisure facilities, particularly those for young people.
- 71 Given the geographical makeup of South Cambridgeshire and the City of Cambridge there are a number of planning issues which impact on both councils. For example the service worked with Cambridge City Council to create the park and ride facilities which largely lie within South Cambridgeshire to serve the needs of South Cambridgeshire residents, surrounding districts and the needs of the city. The service has also worked with the city council to prepare and submit the area action plan for the redevelopment of the Cambridge East (Airport) site which forms a significant future development site.



- 72 The service has worked in partnership with the county council. For example it has secured protection of roadside verges which contain rarer chalk grassland plants - on part of the A605 a revised grass cutting regime means the plants are protected.
- 73 The service works well with parish councils. Planning applications are made available for inspection by the public within the relevant parishes. Officers attend meetings of the parishes councils out of normal office hours when requested and in some instances have provided training on in respect of planning issues. The service has prepared a parish planning pack which is regularly updated and provides a source of information that informs and updates the parish councils.
- 74 The service has established a major development team with 75 per cent of the officers funded by external money. It has enable a more corporate approach to be taken regarding the growth agenda. As part of its work it has formed linkages between internal and external groups and, for example, secured funding for projects such as a church in Cambourne. The establishment of such a team is important if the service is able to give sufficient consideration to major developments whilst allowing the rest of the service to focus on other developments. However, given the team relies on external funding its long term future remains unclear.

#### **Quality village life**

- 75 The service encourages quality design. There is specialist advice available - for example on thatch and thatching which is a traditional roofing material found in many of the villages. A number of schemes have won external design awards - for example an RIBA award for a conversion and extension of a Grade II (star) listed building at Haslingfield Manor. Other examples in Girton College, an extension to a building in Great Abington and the Genome Campus (RTPI 2005). A biannual tour for councillors and officers is undertaken to review the quality of developments on the ground and inform future decisions.
- 76 The service has completed ten conservation area design guides during 2005/06. These inform future developments within the conservation area and contribute to the retention and enhance of the character and quality of the villages.
- 77 The service has been involved in a number of projects within villages that enhance the quality of the environment. For example it has provided funds to design and manage village green space such as that at Watts Wood and Chapel Orchard.
- 78 Planning policies have identified which villages are capable of accommodating limited additional development. This has enabled some small developments - such as in Great Abington, that provides housing to enable local people to remain in the villages whilst at the same time supporting local services that might otherwise be lost.

- 79 Whilst the priority given to securing good quality development is impressive the financial cut backs have resulted some reductions in the service. Funding of local events, such as the apple orchard open days has ceased. Budgets such as the historic repair grants have been cut thereby reducing grants for the repairs of listed building. Timely repair of historic buildings, using appropriate materials and quality workmanship is important if the character of the building and the villages in which they are located is to be retained. There is no evidence that decisions to alter the levels service provided by different parts of the service have been made as a result of a comprehensive and ongoing review of the relative priorities and outcomes delivered.
- 80 There is also a growing tension between the need to focus resources on Northstowe rather than continuing to prepare conservation area appraisals which are key to ensuring the quality of the villages. The service also recognises that urban design input into the major developments is essential to provide quality outcomes but to date the post is unfilled and reliant on external funding.
- 81 Enforcement of planning control is mixed. Enforcement is a key component of the planning system to ensure the amenities of residents and the natural and built environment is protected from inappropriate development. The service has adopted and published enforcement priorities which are linked to council priorities. It has used legal proceedings where appropriate to secure the removal of unauthorised development - for example the removal of stables and a caravan. It is signed up to Enforcement Concordat but there is no evidence that the council has published monitoring report in accordance with the concordat. There is no IT system to allow recording and monitoring of enforcement cases.
- 82 Enforcement is mainly reactive rather than proactive. There is no active targeting of, for example, planning conditions relating to tree protection measures. Once there has been a breach of the condition the potential damage to the trees is irreversible. Building control staff do not routinely check plans to ensure consistency between building regulation and planning applications and reporting of potential unauthorised developments is ad hoc, reliant on individuals rather than a systematic requirement. This means that enforcement activities are not being focussed on priorities or where infringements can be prevented.

### **National priorities**

- 83 Reference to density and use of brownfield sites has been mentioned above.
- 84 Until recently the Council has been slow to determine applications. It was identified by the ODPM as a Planning Standards Authority in 2005/06 and 2006/07 for poor performance in dealing with 'major' planning applications.
- 85 Audited data for 2004/05 indicates the council performed poorly when compared to other councils. Speed of determining minor and major applications showed the council's performance was in the worst performing quartile. In 2003/04 it determined 59 per cent of minor applications in eight weeks against a national target of 65 per cent. For major applications the council determined 39 per cent in 13 weeks against a national target of 60 per cent. Since 2002/03 performance for both types of application has been in the worst quartile or below average.

- 86 Compared to other councils, speed of determining 'other' applications in 2004/05 was above average. The council determined 84 per cent of all other applications in eight weeks against a national target of 80 per cent. This an improvement since 2002/03.
- 87 More recent unaudited data published by the ODPM indicates that speed of determining applications has improved. For the year ending March 2006, 61 per cent of major, 69 per cent of minor and 84 per cent other applications were determined within the national targets. For the quarter (January to March 2006) performance was 79, 72 and 85 per cent respectively. Information supplied by the service indicates that registering applications is still can take up to a week against an internal guide line of two days. This represents a significant reduction in the time available for officers to consider and negotiate applications.
- 88 Appeals allowed against the authority's decision to refuse was amongst the best 25 per cent in 2004/05 at 19 per cent and stands at 18.5 per cent for 2005/06, according to unaudited data.
- 89 Cross cutting priorities such as reducing crime and disorder are being considered. Applications are referred to the police architectural liaison officer and designs modified to design out crime.

### **Is the service delivering value for money?**

- 90 The planning service overall is not providing good value for money. Value for money is the efficient and economic use of resources to deliver effective services that deliver outcomes that address local and national priorities. It is a high cost service which has performed poorly on key performance indicators in the recent past and is now a Planning Standards authority for 2005/06 and 2006/07. Satisfaction has declined. However, as the report outlines above it has delivered a variety of outcome that address local priorities.
- 91 Historically, the Council has had a high cost Planning Service. In 2001/02, 2003/04 and 2004/05, according to CIPFA data South Cambridgeshire had second highest total planning expenditure (£'s per head) of its nearest neighbour comparator group. Total planning expenditure per head has increased steadily since 2001/02, the biggest increase coming between 2003/04 and 2004/05. In 2005/06 service budget was reduced by 9.3 per cent due to cuts caused by rate capping.
- 92 A number of factors contribute to these higher planning costs.
- The number of applications per year is significantly higher than the average for district planning authorities.
  - There are huge development pressures to meet structure plan requirements, resulting in major new settlements, which include both market and affordable housing.
  - There a disproportionately high number of travellers on illegal sites, requiring above average levels of enforcement activity.

- The Council is leading the way in the preparation of the new local development framework.
  - The district has a large number of listed properties and is committed to protecting them through effective conservation and design services.
- 93 The Council compares the costs of some services to other councils but there is no evidence that this is happening for planning services. The service is part of a benchmarking group referred to as the premier division but this has not been used to inform the council about comparative cost. The council as a whole has recognised the need to compare costs more widely. While performance information and budgetary information are both reported regularly there is little evidence that they are routinely considered together, using comparative data on costs and service performance, which might enable officers and councillors to form a clear view on what represents value for money.
- 94 Historically, the Council as a whole has had a history of under spending in both its capital and revenue budgets over recent years. This trend may have been reversed in 2005/06 but this is due to the budget restraints resulting from capping and the need to have more rigour about budget monitoring.
- 95 The introduction of the comprehensive bidding process (CIPs) for new resources from revenue, to apply rigour and a business case methodology, has not been effective. Officers and councillors found the process time consuming; not cost effective and subject to arbitrary shifts in direction from the top. The process was suspended during 2005/06 because of the capping restrictions.
- 96 The Council does not have an effective procurement strategy which embraces the modern procurement framework. Purchasing and tender exercises are undertaken within standing orders and financial regulations to achieve best market price but there is little consideration of longer term costs or the opportunities for savings or greater efficiencies. Some services, such as planning, contract out legal work due to lack of internal capacity but it is unclear whether the cost effectiveness of this practice is reviewed on a regular basis. The service does however use consultants to provide specific expertise where it can not justify employing permanent officers.
- 97 Unaudited data published by the ODPM shows that for the quarter ending September 2005, 89 per cent of applications were delegated which is less than that of many other councils. Information provided by the service suggests that the terms of the delegated agreement that was in place until recently resulted in a further 10 per cent of applications being referred to chairs delegation. The effective use of delegated powers (ie decisions on applications made by officers rather than by councillors) ensures decisions are made quickly and efficiently, while allowing councillors to focus on those applications which are more complex or have greater local interest or potential impacts for the area.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

### What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 98 Since 2003/04 there has been year on year improvement in performance on key national performance indicators (BVPIs) for aspects of the service which measure the speed of planning decisions. However, the Council's performance on major and minor applications remained amongst the worst 25 per cent. Improvement was slightly stronger for other applications. More recent unaudited data for 2005/06 shows there has been continuing improvement in the speed of determining applications. While improving the speed of processing times the Council has striven to ensure that pre-application advice is available to applicants. Developers and parish councils reported that the quality and continuity of that advice was sometimes variable, but access to that service was still valued. Performance improved only slowly until the council became a planning standards authority. Improvement appears stronger in 2005/06 in spite of the local context of budget capping and resource restrictions pointing to a more effective use of staffing especially on major applications.
- 99 There has been continuing strong performance on PIs which measure quality of decision-making rather than speed of processing - for example appeals decisions and the quality of service checklist. Audited PI for 2004/05 indicated the amount of new housing on brownfield land is in the worst quartile, but as reported earlier in the report there are reasons for this and this is not viewed as a major failing.
- 100 There have been organisational changes in the planning service to improve the way the Council responds to the demands posed by the creation of major new settlements. The 'major developments team' has been established and in 2005/06, the authority identified this as a priority area for investment and actually increased the planning capacity with the introduction of a new post of 'majors champion'. This has improved the Council's ability to pool its experience and provide a more consistent and speedy response to developers.
- 101 Customer satisfaction with the planning services has been poor, but this was last measured by survey in 2004. The Council now has plans to measure customer satisfaction more systematically through use of improved IT systems rather than relying on surveys every three years. There are also plans to develop an Agents' Forum. However, there is no clear deadline or action plan for these improvements.
- 102 The planning policy team is at the forefront nationally of the production of a new local development framework. This work is being undertaken with the close participation and guidance of the Go-East. All of the Council's milestones in 2004/05 were achieved. The required public consultation has taken place and councillors have been involved in developing the Council's policy papers.

### 30 Environment Inspection | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 103** The Council has a strong focus on the quality of development and has introduced new policies to support this - such as policies on conservation, ecology and sustainability. These link directly to the corporate objectives of 'maintaining quality village life' and 'sustainability'.
- 104** The Council has taken a lead on improving the quality of design, by publishing the district design guide. It has managed to do this while at the same time accommodating growth and maintaining the district's heritage assets. Conservation services are also recognised, both internally and by external stakeholders as a strong and continuously improving element of the planning service. The council has appointed champions for design and historic environment (at the time of the inspection the Planning & Economic Development Portfolio Holder and the Conservation, Sustainability & Community Planning Portfolio Holder respectively). These appointments were made following a joint recommendation by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) and English Heritage in their capacity as specialist Government advisors on design and the historic environment. These initiatives ensure that focus on quality of design is maintained as well as achieving the numbers of new homes required to meet structure plan requirements.
- 105** The service, working with the housing strategy team have been successful in enabling a significant amount of affordable housing in the district, which makes it one of the best performing council's nationally. Furthermore, the council has recently received confirmation of Housing Corporation funding of over £20 million for the period 2006/08, to support the development of 600 units in South Cambridgeshire. It should be noted that because of the geography of the district that nomination rights for two of the developments at Cambourne and Arbury Camp will be shared equally with Cambridge City Council. This demonstrates that the Council is taking a pragmatic and strategic sub-regional view of the need for affordable housing. This outcome directly contributes to one of the Council's priorities for 2006/07 which is to increase the supply of affordable housing.
- 106** Investment in ICT systems and improvements to the Council's website has made it easier for service users to access information and application forms online. A 'Planning Expert' system has been developed using internal resources after an options appraisal identified the potential for cost savings and increased officer capacity. The Council's website was recently ranked 59th out of 464 in a survey of local authorities. These developments are increasing electronic access to the service within a geographically dispersed district.
- 107** It is too early to judge whether the transfer of development control customer contact into the contact centre run by Cambridgeshire County Council has resulted in better service for users of the planning service. Overall customer satisfaction with the contact centre stands at 93 per cent in figures supplied to the council by the County Council. However, there is no separate assessment of satisfaction in relation to individual services like planning. This is a weakness as it makes directing resources for improvement difficult. The contact centre began to handle development control calls in February 2006. It processes an average of 21,000 calls per month and in April 2006 it handled 1,303 calls for development services.

Concern was expressed both internally and externally that there are problems in the handover between staff handling telephone queries and back office staff whose expertise is required to resolve more complex enquiries. There were some complaints that it was difficult to contact case officers or that calls were not returned. The Council is aware of these difficulties and is developing 'frequently asked questions' and better protocols for the handover of enquiries. Failure to resolve these issues will inhibit better user access to the planning service and adversely affect customer satisfaction.

- 108** Project management skills are not embedded within the service. There are examples of projects which have been well managed, for example the introduction of the majors team or the implementation of the 'Planning Expert' system. However, these successes are largely due to the particular capabilities of the lead officers. There is an agreed Corporate Project Management approach, which was issued in August 2004, but this is not being applied consistently. Some staff believe some projects have been less well run, for example the transfer in of aspects of the planning service to the contact centre. The failure to identify user focussed outcomes that the transfer was expected to deliver accounts for some of the problems referred to above.
- 109** There have been efforts to improve business proceedings at planning and aligned committees, such as conservation and design. Delegation to officers has been increased, most recently in May 2006, to speed up the processing of applications. There is a close relationship with parish councils and while parishes may not always agree with the Council's decisions, they are now allowed to address the planning committee. There are good relationships between officers and councillors at committee meetings and the professionalism of officers is respected. However, members of the public are not allowed to address the Planning committee and training of councillors remains limited and non mandatory.
- 110** The Council has made mixed progress on implementing its CPA improvement plan and mainstreamed monitoring of progress into its performance plan, with individual issues also appearing in relevant service plans. However, some issues, for example the introduction of customer service standards has not progressed according to the original target dates.
- 111** A more strategic approach to understanding the culture and housing needs of travellers has been developed. This has been based on the South Cambridgeshire Travellers Housing Needs survey which identified a need for an additional 170 to 220 pitched over the next five years. As part of a cohesive approach the Council has also developed a firm and consistent approach to enforcement action against unauthorised development. New policies to respond to traveller issues and needs are being incorporate into the emerging local development framework.

## 32 Environment Inspection | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 112** The Council cannot demonstrate steady improvement in value for money over the last three years. In 2005/06 the total cost of the planning service has reduced, but this is as a result of 'capping' and the consequent service cuts and recruitment embargo. Historically, the Council has had an expensive planning service. In 2001/02, 2003/04 and 2004/05, according to CIPFA data South Cambridgeshire had second highest total planning expenditure (£'s per head) of its nearest neighbour comparator group. Until 2005/06 the total planning expenditure per head has increased steadily since 2001/02, the biggest increase coming between 2003/04 and 2004/05. These costs are clearly in the context of a district with huge development pressures, workload and clear corporate priorities to support sustainable development and maintain quality of village life, but there is no evidence that the council has developed a clear view on what represents value for money.
- 113** There has been heavy investment in ICT to improve services across the Council of about £8.5 million over the last five years, with £1.4 million invested in planning services. However, no benefits realisation exercise has been carried out to establish whether the anticipated outcomes and benefits have been achieved. It is unclear whether the commitment to the contact centre will generate cost savings or even be cost neutral and some councillors expressed concerns whether the Transformation Project will achieve all of its objectives in the longer term. Given the Council's difficult financial situation the need to review the value of major projects becomes critical.
- 114** The Council has achieved significant value and communal gains through the use of Section 106 obligations. This has resulted in large numbers of affordable homes, arts provision, landscape maintenance and the provision of community facilities. Cambourne alone achieved developer contributions of £32 million towards local facilities and infrastructure. In relation to affordable housing these Section 106 opportunities have allowed the Council to make convincing and successful bids to the Housing Corporation for external funding to enable building programmes which the Council would otherwise not be able to support. The Council is continuing to develop its thinking on and approach to Section 106 obligations.
- 115** There has been less creativity or success about accessing other sources of external funding. Historically the Council has looked to meet aspirations and expenditure from its own resources and this means opportunities may have been lost. Following budget cuts the Planning Service is now heavily dependant upon Planning Delivery Grant to finance, not just service improvement, but also, day to day service delivery. This presents a risk that services may not be sustainable into the future unless there are increasing efficiency gains.
- 116** Partnership working has increased and improved over recent years on a number of agendas. South Cambridgeshire District, Cambridge City Council and the County Council are now taking collaborative approaches on major new developments such as Cambourne, Northstowe and Arbury Camp, recognising that residents care less about administrative boundaries but more that resulting development should be handled sensitively. There has also been collaboration and co-operation on traveller issues.



The establishment of Cambridgeshire Horizons jointly by the Cambridgeshire local authorities to drive forward the delivery of the growth strategy for the Cambridge sub region in consultation with the Cambridge Landowners Group represents recognition that a strategic approach will better meet the communities' long term needs.

- 117 The Council has been slow to introduce customer service standards. This was an issue that was highlighted in the CPA report in 2004 but standards for individual services were only launched in April 2006 and do not cover all key elements of the service. It is not clear whether there is an explicit link between customer services standards and the development of the contact centre.

### **How well does the service manage performance?**

- 118 The council has clear corporate priorities which relate directly to the planning service. These priorities: improving customer service, the provision of affordable housing and delivering the sustainable growth agenda are all central to the work that planning service does. It was this centrality which protected planning from the severity of budget cuts in the 2005/06 budget cycle when there was a requirement to save £2.6 million council-wide. These priorities have been consulted upon with some stakeholders and achieved some political consensus. Annual service plans are supposed to identify actions which support corporate objectives and priorities. Service actions to achieve service priorities are also set out. Performance is monitored quarterly for all the corporate milestones with reports to management team and then to Cabinet. PI targets are identified for three years ahead and quarterly reports are provided to management team and then to Cabinet.
- 119 Corporate priorities are not always translated into clear prioritised plans at service level. As a result, in spite of severe budget restrictions, the service is striving to do everything as before rather than prioritising and improving focus to deliver manageable outcomes. For example archived planning records dating back to 1948 are being loaded on to the planning system, when in a time of resource shortages, such work may be of a lower priority and the resources used more effectively elsewhere.
- 120 Service planning is not being used effectively to manage the use and allocation of resources within the Service. Service planning has gone through a number of iterations within the Council and in 2005/06 they included references to corporate priorities and CPA improvement actions. There were also sections on mainstreaming risk management, community safety and climate change. Lead officers were identified and milestone dates set. For 2006/07 Service Plans have been simplified even further. Links to corporate milestones remain as do milestone dates and lead officer, but consideration of risk management has moved to discrete risk registers for each service. The service plan has effectively become a list of aims and objectives and in the absence of consistent SMART targets it is impossible to judge whether plans are adequately resourced, realistic or achievable. Nor is it clear how service improvement initiatives are costed or what the links are to budget monitoring. Ineffective service planning is unlikely to support and sustain improvement in the service.

### **34 Environment Inspection | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?**

- 121** The Council has not fully integrated its service plans and cross cutting issues, for example consultation, access to services or community safety are not considered consistently. Service plans can run in parallel to each other and this can mean that resources are not always used to best effect and the relative priority of tasks between different service areas is unclear.
- 122** Notwithstanding the weakness of service plans there are now clear and effective mechanisms to maintain focus on planning service delivery. Strong project management arrangements are in place for the production of the local development framework and there is a keen focus on key performance indicators relating to the speed of processing planning applications. The Planning Committee considers key indicators quarterly and the Chairman is always aware of target times and mindful not to defer applications, unless it is necessary to maintain the quality of the decision. Portfolio Holders are also supplied with monthly performance updates and Cabinet receive quarterly performance reports. The focus on key indicators, particularly at senior officer level, has been important in driving these performance improvements during 2005/06.
- 123** Scrutiny is not playing a central role in monitoring performance indicators or driving service improvement, but is developing a role to undertake detailed review if particular performance indicators give cause for concern. In the past the committee has considered planning enforcement and the costs of planning but few significant changes have resulted.
- 124** There are few local performance indicators and outward facing targets are not being identified or set for key priorities. Local performance indicators clearly linked to corporate priorities are not being used. Whilst indicators (SH320 and SH321) have been identified to measure delivery of affordable housing, data on past performance is not known and targets for future delivery have not been set. Some targets have been set below levels of past performance, for example percentage of appeals allowed.
- 125** Staff are generally unclear on the strategic direction of the council and believe the Council is trying to do too much too quickly without adequate consideration of the resources available or the resources required. There is a view that strategic leadership has been weak in the past, but there is also apprehension that the Transformation Project and the planned reduction from four corporate directors to two may further weaken strategic direction rather than strengthening it as is needed.
- 126** Appraisals are happening throughout the planning service and staff value the opportunity for an open dialogue. Individual targets are set by discussion and negotiation and are designed to be realistic and achievable. Staff report that links are drawn to service and corporate objectives and they understand the role that they can play in the achievement of corporate objectives.

- 127** Communication from the top down is regarded as a weakness by staff. Senior management are regarded as remote and whilst staff recognise that channels of communication exist such as the intranet, email or the Council magazine, there is a desire for more open communication. Some staff reported that councillors leaking issues to the local newspaper has sometimes been the first they have heard of the subject. Good, inclusive communication is essential at any organisation but it is particularly important when there are serious external pressures, such as the development agenda and budget cuts.
- 128** Political leadership regarding the contribution that planning services can make to corporate objectives is generally strong. Executive members showed clear understanding of the central role that planning services play in protecting the character and quality of the District and the need to respond sensitively and pragmatically to development pressures. However, councillors are not regarded by staff as the key players in driving service improvement, that role falls to senior officers.
- 129** The two Portfolio holders, at the time of the inspection for Planning & Economic Development and Conservation, Sustainability & Community Planning were well-informed and knowledgeable and committed to the improvement of the planning service. Both have regular meetings with service heads and monitor service actions regularly throughout the year. There is also a well supported Planning Committee and there has been a high level of councillor involvement in developing the LDF in a series of recent special Council meetings.
- 130** The membership of planning committee is large reflecting the importance that both executive and backbench councillors place on planning issues. There are close links to parish councils and ward councillors regularly attend parish council evening meetings. This is one of the reasons given why District Council committee meetings are during the day. Councillors do see themselves as representatives of community interest and there is some parochialism. However, the Council has still been able to build a consensus to enable structure plan requirements to be achieved through the building of new settlements at Cambourne, Northstowe and Arbury Camp.
- 131** The Council has been able to tackle some difficult problems and stick to difficult decisions. For example:
- in spite of the capping requirements in 2005/06 and the need to save £2.6 million from a Council budget of about £13 million, the planning service was identified as a priority service and largely protected with relatively small cuts;
  - progressing the development plans for Northstowe and not waiting for a government lead through the Community Plan; and
  - arguing successfully for the protection of the green belt against the combined arguments of the Cambridge City Council and the County Council. This could only be achieved if consensus was first achieved within the district that major new settlements would be required at Cambourne and Northstowe.

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- 132** The service has been slow to introduce customer service standards. These have been in development for some time but are now due to be launched in June. Internal standards that are in place have not been consistently monitored and action has only recently been taken to rectify poor performance. For example the service sets out to register applications in two days but in practice it may take up to a week. This is a significant element of the eight-week period the service has to determine the majority of applications and in the best councils' registration can be completed in half a day.
- 133** Some enforcement activity has had to be reduced. The complexity and high profile of the traveller enforcement issue has meant that the Council has devoted more resources in this area. This has resulted in a reduction in other pro-active work but the Council responds to all requests for enforcement. Nevertheless, parish council representatives in particular considered that enforcement of planning conditions was not being rigorously pursued and this has led to a frustration with planning services within their communities.
- 134** The monitoring arrangements for Section 106 obligations have not been strong and community gains have not always been realised as and when expected. The Council recognise this weakness and have plans to set up proper monitoring arrangements. To a degree the problem is exacerbated by the historical nature of some of the first Section 106 obligations, for example in Bar Hill over ten years ago. Since that time both councils and developers have refined their understanding of these planning mechanisms and identified the need for robust trigger mechanism and clear accountability. However, many councils have had similar experiences and developed a response more quickly. Failure to ensure Section 106 gains are achieved represents poor value for money and is also a cause of frustration for parish councils.
- 135** Attempts to improve the consistency of response to planning enquiries for pre-application or formal advice are not embedded. Depending on the experience and attitude of the officer concerned the quality of response can be variable. This was a concern voiced by both developers' agents and parish councils. The Council has sought to address this issue by holding department wide delegation meetings where all development control officers can get a complete picture of issues within the district and learn from more experienced and more senior officers. This learning mechanism has not been entirely successful and failure to achieve consistency of approach will put the Council further at risk if there is significant staff turnover.
- 136** The planning service is receptive to learning and has begun to share it in a more systematic way. There are good examples of where the service has learned from past experience. For example using lessons learned from the Cambourne experience to inform its approach to the future and larger development at Northstowe. These lessons also fed into the good practice guide on developing balanced and mixed communities produced by Cambridgeshire Horizons. The Council is also an active member of the Planning Premier Division group and use this resource to share and identify best practice. The internal Development Control manual is regularly updated.

- 137 The Council has sought to raise the profile of design by appointing Champions for design and the historic environment. This was in response to a joint recommendation by 'CABE' and English Heritage and the emphasis will be welcomed by some stakeholders who believe that the council has limited abilities in urban design.
- 138 There is no systematic use of service complaints data to inform service improvement. The Council has a complaints monitoring system and has worked with the Local Government Ombudsman to respond to complaints, but the emphasis is on meeting timescales rather than focussing on how processes and services might be redesigned to meet better customer needs.

### **Does the service have the capacity to improve?**

- 139 Capacity is a major issue and major risk to the maintenance and improvement of the service. This is made more acute by the significant existing and future external challenges the Council faces. It is an issue that is recognised internally at all levels. The capacity issue primarily centres on the financial resources available to the Council in the light of 'capping' through 2005/06. Financial resources directly impact upon the numbers of planning staff that are available to address the huge development agenda facing the Council and the delivery of the local development framework.
- 140 Capacity is already stretched and there are a number of areas of work where the service has had to reduce its involvement due to insufficient resources. For example, involvement in the emerging regional special strategy and transport work where the service is now relying on others, such as the county council, to represent its interests. Other organisations may also have limited resources and the service can not rely on them indefinitely to represent the best interests of South Cambridgeshire in any negotiations or decision-making.
- 141 Notwithstanding earlier comments about inconsistencies of response Planning staff are generally regarded by stakeholders as competent and committed. Professionalism and expertise in areas such as conservation, strategic housing, sustainability and development control is recognised and valued. The concern of stakeholders is how long officers, who are considered to be under resourced and overworked can continue to deliver existing levels of service and continuous improvement. The service has experienced a high level of staff turnover in the last two years and continues to have difficulty recruiting professional staff. There is anecdotal evidence of parish clerks receiving emails from development control staff late into the night. This is unlikely to be sustainable into the future.
- 142 The Council has taken action to address capacity issues. It has:
- recognised planning as a priority service and to a degree protected the service from staffing cuts caused by budget;
  - sought to maximise PDG to fund planning posts and recognises that a continued focus on performance improvement is necessary to maximise PDG into the future;

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- used PDG and partnerships, most notably with Cambridgeshire Horizons, to finance the dedicated major development team that deals solely with project such as new Cambourne, Northstowe, Arbury Camps, Cambridge East and the Southern Fringe;
- sought to use Section 106 funding creatively or partnerships with registered social landlords to fund posts;
- attempted to deliver ancillary services in different ways, for example it is encouraging parish councils in partnership with A.C.R.E. to undertake village housing needs surveys; and
- used consultants to assist with peaks in workload and to bring in specialist skills which are not otherwise available to the Council.

**143** The planning departmental management team monitors the average caseload per officer to try and ensure workloads are manageable. The major development team are excluded from this analysis as ratios would be distorted and the total figure for applications is adjusted downwards. The caseload per officer is currently around 150/160, which is slightly over the Government recommendations.

**144** There is not an effective workforce plan in place. A workforce plan was developed in 2005 but it was overtaken by the capping decision and subsequent staffing reductions. A workforce plan is an appropriate tool to help a Council through a period of serious resource restrictions but the Council's workforce plan has not been updated to reflect the new circumstances. Failure to plan means the council is forced to be reactive rather than proactive. This may mean that consultants are being used when better value for money longer term options may be available.

**145** The Council has responded to recruitment difficulties and the national shortage of planning officers by adopting a 'grow your own' policy. This is an issue that was addressed in the workforce plan. Thus, many of the current staff were recruited from school or college and their skills and experience were developed in-house. Some are now in senior positions. This is a pragmatic response to a national problem but there is concern amongst some stakeholders that when experienced officers leave or retire there will not be sufficient continuity. There is no clear succession planning to cater for such an eventuality.

**146** There has been significant investment in IT to streamline processes and make services more accessible and manageable by applicants and their agents. For example: on line application searches and electronic submission of comments on applications. However, there are further phases of IT improvements planned and to be implemented before all of the benefits are realised. Furthermore, some IT officers, including the web development officer are on fixed term contracts and will be leaving the authority in the near future.

- 147** Business process re-engineering to support the transfer of elements of the planning service into the contact centre has not yet been completed. Some staff and users remain unconvinced about the suitability of the contact centre to deliver a multi-faceted and public facing service like planning. Some staff also expressed concerns about how effectively the project to transfer in aspects of planning service is being project managed. The full benefits of transferring planning enquires into the contact centre are unlikely to be realised and apparent to staff and users until business processes have been re-engineered.
- 148** There is no capacity to provide future strategic leadership at a senior management level to deal with the growth agenda. The loss of the Strategic Director of Planning in June 2006, as part of the Transformation Project, poses another threat to the department's capacity. Given the centrality of planning services to the Council's corporate priorities and the significant challenges relating to the major housing growth that is already underway and proposed over the next ten to 15 years. The current Director of Development is the council lead in forging partnership working and longer strategic planning necessary to deliver the growth whilst the planning service undertakes the more day to day and statutory functions. The capacity of other senior officers within the service is already stretched and it is unclear how the important strategic role can be given the priority it demands. At the time of the inspection final decisions were being taken but middle managers remained unclear about roles and reporting lines into the future.
- 149** There is no clear exit strategy for the loss of PDG, currently predicted for 2008. A number of key posts are currently funded by PDG, for example 75 per cent of the major applications team. In the short term the Council is seeking to maximise PDG to make up funding shortfalls elsewhere. This is pragmatic in current circumstances but only increase the service's reliance on PDG. There is recognition that the Council's own financial resource position is unlikely to improve significantly in the medium term and that promised increases in planning fees are also unlikely to meet the shortfall caused by the loss of PDG. However, there is no clear plan to deal with this eventuality.
- 150** There is limited capacity in the legal section to support planning objectives. The loss of an experienced legal officer with detailed knowledge and expertise in Section 106 obligations has exposed the Council's over reliance on individual skills. The council has now contracted to buy in this expertise from specialist solicitors but this may not represent value for money. Even at a lower level, land transfers to enable housing development have sometimes been delayed because of staff shortages.
- 151** The Council has used partnerships to supplement capacity and access expertise on particular aspects of service. For example, the Ormiston Trust (Travellers) with Cambridge City to obtain the views and needs of the travelling community and help them use the planning system. There are also partnerships with RSLs and the Housing Corporation to deliver affordable housing. However, the Council has not assessed the cost benefits of all its partnership and taken a pragmatic view whether to withdraw from those which are not central to its core priorities.

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- 152** The Council does not have a robust modern procurement strategy to apply best practice and improve value for money. Some low level operational savings have been made, for example on copiers, but there has not been a thorough assessment of the scale of opportunity improved procurement might offer to services under financial pressure. Furthermore the Council's Procurement Officer is on a fixed term contract and is due to leave in March 2007.
- 153** The planning service is only playing a small part, £25,000 in 2004/05, in achieving the Council's Gershon efficiency savings target. It is unlikely that significant additional efficiency savings can be found until the business process re-engineering project has been completed.
- 154** Councillor capacity at portfolio holder and cabinet level is generally well respected. However, it is recognised that backbench councillors would benefit from training on planning matters and planning enforcement. Some courses have been provided in-house but attendance has been variable. Better trained councillors will be better equipped to make informed contributions to debates on planning and enforcement matters.