

Service Inspection Report

July 2008



# Planning Inspection

**Norwich City 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 coordination and a more holistic approach to the assessment of performance by audited and inspected bodies;
- share learning to create a common understanding of performance that encourages rigorous self assessment and better understanding of their performance by inspected organisations;
- be carried out objectively by skilled and experienced people to high standards and using relevant evidence, transparent criteria, and open review processes; and
- enable continuous learning so that inspections can become increasingly effective and efficient.

We assess services using published key lines of enquiry (KLOE) to inform our judgements. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's website 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

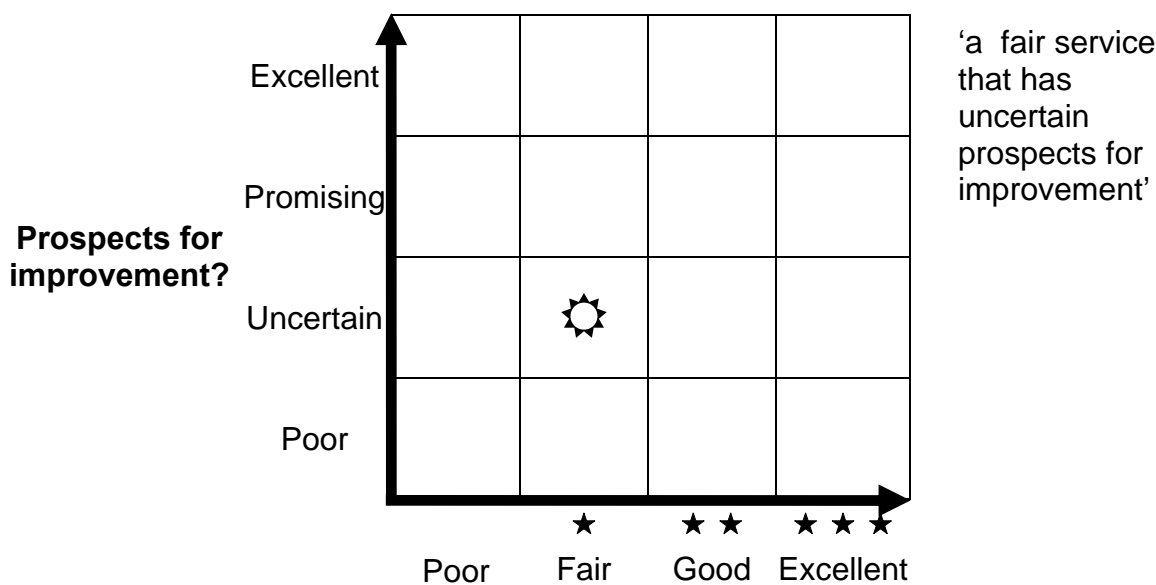
- 1 The planning service offers a 'fair' one-star service with 'uncertain' prospects for improvement.
- 2 The service is delivering many of its key objectives such as very high levels of affordable housing, protection and enhancement of the city's heritage, investing in regeneration initiatives and developing future planning policy in conjunction with neighbouring authorities. The service is having a positive impact on the quality of Norwich as a city.
- 3 The service is contributing well to many wider environmental and other objectives. It is improving energy efficiency, helping through provision of sustainable development measures to reduce the number of vehicles crossing the inner ring road by 24,000 between 1998 and 2007 and seeking to improve the deprived areas of the city. The service is improving accessibility to services and facilities for all residents, for example as at Cinema City.
- 4 The Council is taking a lead in reducing its own carbon footprint. For example, the Council's green travel plan has resulted in the proportion of Council employees walking or cycling to work has increased from 33 per cent in 2006/07 to 46 per cent in 2007/08. Energy efficiency of the Council's council house stock is above the national average. Norwich also has the second highest proportion of residents travelling to work by walking or cycling in England in 2007: 32 per cent in comparison with 40 per cent in Cambridge.
- 5 However, the service has been less successful in other areas. For example, it has had less impact on increasing the availability of employment land for small businesses, a key economic objective for the city. It is also not yet effective at dealing with people who breach planning regulations and monitoring compliance with planning permissions. Councillor training and workforce planning are not fully effective. The speed in which planning applications are determined is improving but is below government expected standards for major applications.
- 6 The service does not maximise its learning from customers and response to customer needs is mainly reactive. For example, customer standards are not in place across the service. The planning applications committee is during the working day and the public and service users have not been consulted on the timing. Training on human rights, diversity and equality is limited and the service does not actively monitor compliance. There is a lack of systematic service analysis to ensure that the needs of hard to reach groups are being met and learning from customer complaints and comments has been reactive not systematic and proactive.

- 7 The planning service has a mixed track record in delivering improvements. Local Development Framework (LDF) milestones are being broadly met; the service has been successful in achieving a growth point bid for the greater Norwich area with partners and is having a positive impact on the environment and local heritage. However, the Council has been a Planning Standards authority for the last three years and customer satisfaction with the Planning Service fell from 73 per cent in 2003/04 (below average against other district councils) to 52 per cent in 2006/07 (at the level of the worst districts).
- 8 Earlier attempts to improve development control have not been fully effective. The Council was unable to deliver its first Planning Improvement Plan (PIP) 2004/07 because of a historical lack of corporate commitment to improving development control. In addition, recruitment difficulties led to a persistently high number of vacancies in the development management team and problems associated with the introduction of an electronic document management system for development management. The performance management framework has not driven consistent improvement and Scrutiny has been ineffective. The council has not previously recognised the importance of development control in delivering wider objectives.
- 9 The Council has been unable to deliver improvements to increase its effectiveness. Electronic systems do not meet the business needs of the service. Staff regard existing systems as a barrier to improvement, in particular the cost of system improvements and the time it takes to achieve them. The planning service cannot demonstrate steady improvement in value for money. In 2004/05 net expenditure was £1.26m and this rose to £1.79m in 2007/08 (a 42 per cent increase), even though there were a considerable number of vacant posts during that period. The service has not made effective use of Planning Delivery Grant (PDG).
- 10 Capabilities are not consistent across the planning service. Customers report inconsistent advice on the same subject provided by different officers, particularly in relation to development control matters. Inconsistent advice has also been provided to councillors at planning applications committee. Councillor capabilities are also inconsistent and training is not well developed.
- 11 However, the service is self aware of its weaknesses and what it needs to focus on to improve and corporate commitment at both senior officer and politically has now made service improvement a priority. Planning is central to the Council's growth objectives and corporate support for the service has increased. Priority objectives in the second Planning Improvement Plan have been achieved and most staff vacancies filled. Senior management capacity has been increased with an eye to the development of a performance management culture.
- 12 The planning service has a clear vision for what it wants to achieve and this sits well with corporate objectives. Work is underway to make service plans better fit for purpose. Targets have been made more meaningful and will inform the developing team plans and personal appraisals. Appraisals are happening and staff value the opportunity for dialogue and the setting of personal targets. Staff understand the contribution they can make to corporate objectives. Morale is good and there is an expressed commitment to service improvement.

## Scoring the service

- 13 We have assessed Norwich City 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*

- 14 The service is a fair, one-star service because:
- the service is enabling development that meets most local, regional and national priorities creating positive outcomes for local people;
  - planning policy development is progressing well using effective partnership with other councils;
  - a good range of design and other advice is available to the public to shape future development;
  - the service is having a positive impact on the design quality and historic fabric of the city;

<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 Planning Inspection | Scoring the service

- the service is making a positive contribution to wider corporate aims such as making Norwich safe and secure;
- the Council is helping to meet wider environmental objectives; and
- the service has been successful in attracting external funding to deliver service objectives.

However:

- service users are not receiving a consistent service from development control;
- satisfaction with the planning service is low;
- service standards are not in place across the whole service to help the public know what standard of service to expect;
- the service is not maximising learning from others across the whole service and response to customer needs is mainly reactive;
- the service has had limited impact on increasing the availability of employment land for small businesses, a key economic objective for the city;
- the planning enforcement function is reactive and under-resourced;
- the speed in which planning applications are determined is improving but for major applications remains below Government expectations; and
- the service cannot demonstrate value for money.

**15** The service has uncertain prospects for improvement because:

- there is a mixed track record in delivering improvement and development control track record of improvement is weak;
- earlier attempts to improve development control have not been effective due to a historical lack of corporate commitment to improve development control and understand its role and high levels of staff vacancies;
- financial and service planning has been weak with limited understanding of the costs of the service and comparative benchmarking;
- officer and councillor capacity is not consistently strong and there is some role confusion; and
- IT systems are cumbersome and mechanisms for improving them are slow.

However:

- staffing problems have been overcome by improving salaries and developing staff capabilities in house. Senior management capacity has been strengthened through restructuring and recruitment;
- priority actions of the Performance Improvement Plan have been achieved and the service is self aware about the next priorities;
- corporate support for the planning service has increased and the Performance Management Improvement Board (PMIB) has adopted planning as a focus for improvement;
- the service is self aware of the priorities for improvement and has already begun to address weaknesses in financial and service planning. There is a corporate commitment to address deficiencies IT systems; and
- appraisal is happening and is valued. Staff morale is good.

## Recommendations

- 16 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 Improve the customer focus of the service through:*

- *developing a more systematic approach to learning from comments and complaints;*
- *service analysis to ensure the needs of hard to reach groups, the public, service users and key stakeholders are being met through service delivery; and*
- *developing and promoting service standards that reflect the needs of users across all service elements and monitoring them to ensure they are met.*

The expected **benefits** of this recommendation are:

- equitable service delivery to all members of the community and better customer focus;
- service information and delivery arrangements that meet the needs of the public and key stakeholders more effectively;
- improved demonstrable learning both within the service and across service elements; and
- better promotion of priorities and service standards to the public allowing more effective engagement with the service.

The implementation of this recommendation will have **high** impact with low costs. Service standards and complaints monitoring systems should be developed by February 2009 for on-going implementation.

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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 service efficiency and effectiveness by:*

- *undertaking a systematic business process re-engineering review of the planning service, prioritising the needs of development control and enforcement to ensure that work processes are efficient, future information technology requirements are assessed and the service improvement plan is reviewed and resourced to implement findings;*
- *addressing current weaknesses in the enforcement service;*
- *improving the legal capacity to the service;*
- *considering whether to increase the level of delegation where appropriate to speed up the planning application decision-making process;*
- *developing, implementing and monitoring service indicators to measure and improve service efficiency and value for money; and*
- *introducing effective workforce planning to address the future needs of the service.*

The expected **benefits** of this recommendation are:

- improved management of value for money;
- more efficient and effective service delivery to the public; and
- better preparedness to meet the demands of 'growth point' status.

The implementation of this recommendation will have **high** impact with **medium** costs. This should be implemented by December 2008.

**Recommendation**

*R3 Improve the effectiveness and capacity of councillors and planning related committees by:*

- *regularly reviewing the delegation agreement and its implementation;*
- *ensuring that the chairs are given suitable training and support to fulfil their role;*
- *the standardisation of reports and committee training for planning officers to ensure staff fulfil their role as professional advisors to councillors effectively;*
- *on-going regular and compulsory training for all councillors involved in planning related decision-making; and*
- *updating the basic planning knowledge of all other councillors.*

## 12 Planning Inspection | Recommendations

The expected **benefits** of this recommendation are:

- ensuring councillor skills and knowledge are kept up to date to enable fair, consistent and transparent decision-making;
- supporting other councillors understanding of the planning system to help them deal effectively with planning enquiries from their constituents and to operate their scrutiny role effectively; optimising the skills of officers and councillors in improving performance and value for money; and
- ensuring appropriate conduct and probity to reduce potential risks to the Council.

The implementation of this recommendation will have **high** impact with low costs. This should be implemented by December 2008.

# Report

## Context

### The locality

- 17 Norwich is the only city in Norfolk, in the east of England. Covering an area of 39 square kilometres, it is the smallest but most densely populated district council in Norfolk with 3,164 persons per square kilometre. There are 129,500<sup>3</sup> people living in Norwich of which 6 per cent are from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities. The city also has a significant non British or Irish white community. Two-thirds of this group are Polish. Norwich has a younger population than the national average, with a high number aged between 15 and 34. This is reflected in the high student population of approximately 26,000 which includes 1,200 international students.
- 18 Norwich is the largest urban economy in the region. Tourism is important attracting five million day visitors per year. The city is a centre for major employers, with around 50,000 workers commuting into Norwich each day, and a further 20,000 or more visitors at weekends. Eighty-eight per cent of jobs are in the service sector with a higher than average level of jobs in finance and IT. One in four jobs in the city is in the financial sector. Norwich has the highest proportion of employees in the creative industries in the region.
- 19 Small businesses however are under-represented in the Norwich economy. Rates of unemployment are above the Norfolk and national average at 3.5 per cent. The Council was awarded £8.9m in December 2006 in Round Two of the Local Enterprise Growth Initiative (LEGI) to improve the local economy.
- 20 Norwich has a rich architectural heritage with over 1,500 buildings of historic importance within the city walls including 32 mediaeval churches. There are 17 conservation areas. It is also a green city with 500 hectares of parks and open spaces representing 35 per cent of the city council area. It has eight local nature reserves and 33 Sites of Special Scientific Interest.
- 21 Norwich has relatively high levels of deprivation, ranked 62 out of 354 local authorities<sup>4</sup> nationally (where one is the most deprived). Behind Great Yarmouth, it is the second most deprived area in the region. Seven wards of Norwich's thirteen wards fall within the top 10 per cent deprived nationally. The city has the highest proportion of housing benefit recipients and council tax benefit recipients of all local authorities in the eastern region. Educational attainment in some areas of Norwich is well below the national average, and has been for ten years. For example in the Mile Cross ward, only 1 per cent of residents have a recognised educational qualification against the national average of 25 per cent.

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<sup>3</sup> Mid 2006 population estimates

<sup>4</sup> Indices of Deprivation 2007

- 22 The average house price for Norwich at £181,718 (July to September 2007), is below county and national averages. Norwich has low levels of owner occupied housing in comparison to the region. Twenty-one per cent of housing in Norwich is council rented rising to 48 per cent in some wards. Homelessness is above the national average.

### **The council**

- 23 The Audit Commission, in its Comprehensive Performance Assessment of the Council in 2003, assessed the Council as a 'fair' council.
- 24 Norwich City Council has 39 councillors, 3 for each of the City's 13 wards. Following the elections on 3 May 2008, the political make-up of the Council is 15 Labour, 6 Liberal Democrats, 13 Green and 5 Conservative councillors. No one party has overall control of the Council. The Labour group is acting as the Council's executive, with a minority administration.
- 25 The Council uses the leader and executive model of governance and elects a Mayor each year. The Executive consists of eight members of the Labour group, including the Leader of the Council and meets fortnightly. Unusually, the leaders of the other main parties also attend the Executive although they have no voting rights. The executive councillors each have a portfolio responsibility:
- sustainable city development;
  - housing and adult learning;
  - neighbourhood development;
  - community safety and community cohesion;
  - residents and customer care;
  - children and young people; and
  - corporate resources and governance.
- 26 A new Chief Executive was appointed to the Council in January 2006. The Council has three strategic directorates: resources; regeneration and planning; and communities and neighbourhoods. However, Directorate structures changed in June 2008.
- 27 The Council employs 818 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff across all services. The net expenditure of the Council for 2007/08 is £23.3m compared to 2006/07 is £22.5m. Eighty per cent of homes in Norwich are in band A or B for council tax compared with the national average of bands D to E. This equates to an average council tax of £159.55 per household per year.
- 28 Arrangements for the structure of local government are currently under review and the City Council has made submissions seeking the establishment of a unitary council for Greater Norwich. The Boundary Committee will make its recommendations to the Secretary of State in December 2008.

- 29 The Council published its corporate plan in July 2007, retaining the same priorities as 2006 – to provide strong, ambitious leadership; keeping the economy prosperous and competitive; making Norwich a safe and secure place for all; ensuring a clean and healthy environment; and building strong, proud communities and neighbourhoods.
- 30 The local strategic partnership (LSP) – the City of Norwich Partnership, is responsible for co-ordinating the delivery of agreed local priorities. The partnership is consulting on a draft sustainable community strategy, with a proposed overall citywide vision ‘to make Norwich a world class city in which to live, work, learn and visit’.

### **The Council’s planning service**

- 31 The planning service is in the regeneration and development directorate. Net expenditure for planning and regeneration services in 2007/08 was £1.79m. The service comprises 38 staff.
- 32 The service under review consists of:
  - development control including appeals and enforcement;
  - planning policy; and
  - urban design and conservation.
- 33 The inspection has not directly included building control, land searches or the regeneration function of the service.
- 34 Over the last few years the service has been designated as a 'standards authority' for its weak performance in terms of the speed in which it determines some types of planning application. In 2007/08 it was designated a 'standards authority' for the time taken to determine 'major' planning applications. As such, the development control service (known locally as 'development management' service), has been subject to detailed examination by central government of the operational aspects of the service. This inspection has not repeated this work but considers 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.
- 35 Some service elements are provided directly in partnership with others. The Greater Norwich Development Partnership (GNDP) covers the three districts of Broadland, Norwich and South Norfolk and is supported by Norfolk County Council and the Broads Authority. The GNDP, established in 2006, is an informal partnership having a structure that includes a councillor ‘policy group’, strategic director and planning team co-ordination. The partnership is responsible collectively for delivering the LDF joint core strategy for the three districts, and providing the major evidence studies to underpin the strategy. Norwich is managing a number of these major evidence studies such as the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment. The City Council established Norwich HEART (Heritage, Economic and Regeneration Trust) in 2003 as its lead external agency co-ordinating the regeneration and promotion of heritage assets in the city.

## How good is the service?

### What has the service aimed to achieve?

#### Local objectives

- 36** The Norfolk local area agreement (LAA) is relevant to the Council's own vision for the city. It contains a number of relevant targets and ambitions for tackling deprivation, making communities safer and ensuring sustainable development.
- 37** The local strategic partnership (LSP) – the City of Norwich Partnership, is responsible for co-ordinating the delivery of agreed local priorities. The partnership is consulting on a draft sustainable community strategy which looks forward to 2020. Priority themes are being developed against which all partners will seek to deliver their service plans and resources. The priority themes are: city of economic growth and enterprise; city of environmental excellence; city of culture and creativity; city of safe and strong communities; city of health and well-being; and city of learning and personal development. Planning has a core role in helping to deliver LSP objectives where they involve land.
- 38** The Council's medium term vision to 2010 is:
- 'Strong and prosperous city, safe and healthy neighbourhoods and opportunity for all.'*
- 39** Council strategic and cross-cutting objectives arising from this medium term vision are:
- to provide strong and ambitious leadership to make the city proud of its council;
  - to build a successful economic future for Norwich and secure sustainable growth;
  - to make Norwich safe and secure, building strong and proud local communities;
  - to ensure the city has a clean and healthy environment; and
  - to develop the delivery of our services on a neighbourhood basis.
- 40** Under the medium term objectives, the Council sets annual short term objectives. For planning these are specifically:
- to 'deliver growth and development and promote environmental sustainability'; and
  - to 'deliver more affordable homes'.
- 41** In addition, the Council has adopted a number of cross-cutting themes which impact on the planning service. These are to raise the profile of the city in the region through Regional Cities East; tackling anti-social behaviour; Growth Point delivery; and protecting and enhancing the historic fabric of the city through HEART.

- 42 Local planning policy to 2011 is provided through the Norwich Replacement Local Plan. The current timetable for the Local Development Framework (LDF) which will replace the local plan, aims for the core strategy to be adopted by April 2010. The service has developed various supplementary planning documents (SPD's) and the local development scheme which provides the timetable for preparing elements of the LDF was refreshed in 2007.
- 43 The adopted replacement local plan has been informed by local and regional data and takes into account recent national planning guidance for example, sustainable transport. There is a housing requirement of 7,400 units (and a council target that 66 per cent is to be achieved on previously developed land).
- 44 Planning also directly contributes to the provision of affordable housing .The housing needs strategy has identified a need for 1,380 affordable homes to be provided to 2011.
- 45 Plans and strategies are supported through service plans; team plans; appraisals and development plans. Service objectives link to three-year outcomes and council objectives and priorities.

#### **National and regional objectives**

- 46 The regional spatial strategy has just been published which provides the strategic framework for planning policy at a local level. The greater Norwich area has been designated as a 'growth point' for new development in the region. The GNDP is co-ordinating this growth. The partnership needs to plan and find locations for 37,500 additional homes and 35,000 new jobs by 2021. For Norwich district for example, approximately 37 per cent of this housing requirement will need to be found within the city boundary. Planning policy development locally is about preparing for this additional growth and ensuring that there is sufficient infrastructure, services and facilities to support sustainable growth.
- 47 Nationally, the planning system has been substantially reformed to make policy making local community driven and to make contributing to the achievement of sustainable development a statutory objective. Planning is at the heart of the delivery of government objectives and has a core role in delivering local strategic partnership objectives which require physical development. The new LDF is designed to help this happen in policy terms and development control is the means of delivery.

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

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

- 48 Satisfaction with the planning service by planning applicants is among the worst district councils. The service has not actively sought to understand 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, and this results in dissatisfaction.

- 49 The public are not fully benefiting from technology designed to help them access service information out of hours. Planning application progress can be tracked online, however users reported that the system is difficult to navigate and downloading of information is very time-consuming and difficult.
- 50 Service delivery is not fully customer driven. For example, the planning applications committee is held during the day which inhibits the ability of the public to attend and users not consulted about their preferences. In contrast, the GNDP produce regular newsletters that are circulated to key stakeholders on progress and has an up to date dedicated website. Local people report being kept informed of the progress of major applications on which they have been consulted.
- 51 There is limited evidence of meeting the needs of residents and stakeholders through consultation. For example, changes made to the Gildencroft Park proposals to incorporate views such as no dog walking, incorporation of football posts and some design changes to address anti-social behaviour but the impact of consultation is not systematically evaluated. Additionally, the new developers forum has had limited impact yet. 'Quality design panel'<sup>5</sup> members are not clear what impact they are making to the planning decision process and member expectations are not managed effectively by the service. The service and stakeholders are not clear on the impact consultation is having on outcomes.
- 52 Outward focused service standards are not in place across the service. For example, service standards are not established for development control. Enforcement priorities are in place but are not well promoted to the public and planning policy service standards are mainly process-focused. It is not clear to the public what level of service to expect.
- 53 However, there is effective internal cross council working on large development proposals and planning policy development. A development team formed from officers across the council meet fortnightly to discuss issues for pre-application discussions to provide a joined up approach to developers. Pre-application advice is encouraged on all applications and heritage issues. Planning and housing services jointly commissioned the housing needs survey and the housing market assessment and work closely to deliver affordable housing to meet local needs. Information held by other departments is used to inform planning policy - for example data on housing need, the local economy, and the natural environment has been used to inform policy development and other guidance. Consequently, the council is taking a joined up approach to planning issues.
- 54 There is a good range of advisory planning information to help the public engage effectively. Design and site specific guidance and practical information is available to help sustain the historic heritage such as Norwich Historic Colour Strategy' which lists local traditional paint colours and sources to buy them. Local people have access to appropriate knowledge on planning related matters.

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<sup>5</sup> 'quality design panel' comprising local architects, heritage societies, disability groups and the police architectural liaison officer to get an informed view as part of pre-application discussion arrangements and major development proposals

## Diversity

- 55 Access requirements are in place to meet the physical needs of customers. The planning services reception area is wheelchair friendly; the service has access to a language line and documents are available in a variety of formats. People with disabilities and where English is not a first language, are not disadvantaged in accessing the service.
- 56 The service is positively influencing accessibility of new schemes for all residents. For example, as part of improvements to 'Cinema City', despite listed building status, through negotiation, sensitive lift access has been achieved resulting in full accessibility to the three resulting screens without significant detriment to the historic fabric of the building. In addition, successful negotiation secured workable solutions and improved disabled access for the re-development of the former Samson and Hercules nightclub at Tombland to mixed-use restaurant and flats.
- 57 The service is successfully delivering special needs housing. One hundred and fifty dwellings have been built in the last two years to meet the special needs of residents, over and above standard affordable housing. The diverse housing needs of residents are being met.
- 58 Diversity and equality considerations are not well developed in the service. Training on human rights, diversity and equality is limited and the service does not actively monitor compliance. Training has been limited to management personnel and new staff rather than to established frontline staff who are most in contact with the public. Service plans over the last two years have been subject to an equality impact assessment but the impact of this on service delivery to the public is not clear. There is increased risk that the service is in breach of legislation.
- 59 Planning policy has worked hard to ensure hard to reach groups are engaged in the growth agenda, but this level of engagement is not replicated across all service areas. As part of the options consultation for the GNDP, planning policy used consultation to identify what was important to older people and younger people in Norwich and targeted minority groups and deprived geographical areas with tailored techniques. However, this level of engagement is not well developed in development control. There may be barriers to the local community engagement within the planning service.

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

- 60 Service performance is mixed. For example, whilst it has been effective in areas such as affordable housing and improving the quality of the built environment, it has been less successful in meeting the needs of smaller businesses to reduce the reliance of the local economy on large companies.

## Local and regional priorities

### *Safe and secure neighbourhoods*

- 61 The service is working positively with partners to help reduce the risk of anti-social behaviour and crime. The police architectural liaison officer's contact with the planning service is making a difference. For example the Duke's Wharf scheme has had improved lighting and better access control from the river to reduce potential for crime and some schemes such as the Elizabeth Fry affordable housing development have 'secured by design' status.
- 62 The service is effective at focusing improvement on deprived communities. The service is working closely with a major developer to deliver improved neighbourhood shops, an art centre, services and housing at Hall Road. Development plan documents are focusing on redeveloping areas most in need such as Anglia Square. The service is working to improve the environment and access to local services for all residents. This means it is focussing on geographical areas it can have the most impact for local people.

### *Deliver more affordable homes*

- 63 The service has a very good track record in providing affordable homes. Rates of affordable housing are significantly above the target rate set in the Local Plan and the council is on target to deliver 612 affordable homes for 2007/08. Forty-seven per cent of completed units in 2006/07 were with the assistance of section 106 contributions. Housing mix provides for a good range of house types including bed sits and flats for single households and first time buyers. Identified needs for affordable housing are being met.
- 64 The Council has a strong record on the delivery of housing to meet the special needs of the community which is covered in paragraph 57 above.

### *Deliver growth and development and promote environmental sustainability*

- 65 Good partnership working with the PCT has led to improving health access for local people. The service worked closely with the PCT to develop the St Stephen's Gate Medical Practice in Wessex Street, which has a number of practice rooms and a pharmacy. Innovative practice to protect trees during construction using modern technological construction techniques allowed the retention of protected trees at the front of the building.
- 66 The service is delivering a high standard of design and improving the historic fabric of Norwich effectively. The city has scored silver in the finals of the International Awards for Liveable Communities. The heritage economic regeneration scheme (HERS) in Magdalen Street and St Augustine's Street has resulted in 18 historic buildings being refurbished and three public space enhancement projects undertaken. The Chapelfield development won the British Council for Shopping Centres Gold Award in 2006. The service is improving the built fabric of Norwich for local residents.

- 67** Planning policy for the city is being updated appropriately to deliver service priorities. By 2007/08, six major studies to support growth had been conducted on areas crucial to future development: infrastructure; employment; flood risk; water resources; green infrastructure; and retailing and town centres. The joint core strategy is on target through the GNDP. Norwich is also developing the Northern City Centre Area Action Plan which went out to consultation in 2007. This is helping to regenerate Anglia Square, a dated shopping development, and re-link this part of the city to the rest of the city through improved pedestrian and cycleway links. The service is making good progress on the new planning framework to deliver the growth agenda and meet local need.
- 68** Building rates are on target to meet the regional expectations. Over the last two years housing build rates have exceeded that required to meet the regional targets under the growth agenda. It has been calculated that if there is a downturn in the economy, because growth rates have been so high, the service would still achieve the 705 units per year necessary to meet the housing targets.
- 69** The service is achieving sustainable development. 88.3 per cent of housing is being built on previously developed land exceeding the local plan target of 66 per cent in 2006/07 and national expectations of 60 per cent. In addition new development is being planned to reduce the need to travel through locating mixed forms of development near existing services and facilities and improving energy efficiency through requiring the submission of energy efficiency statements for schemes of ten or more houses. For example, new flat development is located near existing shopping centres, the train station and existing bus routes. Average housing densities are high at 56.8 units per hectare, (increasing to an average of 135 units per hectare in the city centre). This far exceeds local plan targets and the government minimum requirement of 30 units per hectare. Sustainable transport is encouraged and all new development since 2004 has had to accommodate cycle parking. As a result, sustainable planning practice is in part responsible for a marked decline in the number of vehicles crossing the inner ring road of 24,000 vehicles between 1998 and 2007 or an average reduction of 2.6 per cent per year and the increasing use of cycling to work. The service is making the most efficient use of land for development and minimising the need to travel by private car.
- 70** The service is maintaining and enhancing city centre retail distinctiveness and viability through new retail investment. In 2006/07, shop vacancy rates in the city were only 5.3 per cent in the town centre and 2.9 per cent in the primary shopping area. In addition, the planning service has invested in the 'Lanes' to improve the local environment and promote the special character and independent traders in this part of the city.
- 71** Section 106 agreements are bringing in substantial benefits to the local community. For example, 47 per cent of affordable housing is provided through these agreements, the service has secured improvements to public open space and play areas, infrastructure improvements, heritage improvements, increased cycle and provision for walkers including the Riverside Walk, and better links to the city centre from new development.

- 72 However, the service is not effective at widening the local economic base of the area and reducing its dependence on large companies, a key council objective. The annual monitoring report produced in December 2007 highlights a lack of consistency in application of business use policies for example, to provide a greater range of uses in prime employment areas in particular in small self-contained business units, a key issue for the local economy. In addition new employment development is reported as being very low for the second year running and is largely on greenfield land. The service has not been successful at addressing the business needs of the district.

### **National and other planning priorities**

- 73 The Council is effectively reducing its own carbon footprint in the district. For example, the Council's green travel plan has resulted in the proportion of council employees walking or cycling to work has increased from 33 per cent in 2006/07 to 46 per cent in 2007/08. Energy efficiency of the council's council house stock is above the national average. Norwich also has the second highest proportion of residents travelling to work by walking or cycling in England in 2007: 32 per cent in comparison with 40 per cent in Cambridge.
- 74 However, planning best value performance indicators are mixed. Government targets for the speed in which planning decisions are made are now being met with the exception of 'major' applications. But the speed in which planning applications are determined although improving were among the worst performing district councils in 2006/07 in two out of three types of application. The council has failed to recognise the importance of development control to delivering strategic objectives such as the 'growth' arising from 'growth point' status.

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

- 75 Value for money is the efficient and economic use of resources to deliver effective services that produce outcomes that address local and national priorities.
- 76 The planning service is not providing value for money for local residents. Planning service costs are among the highest in the nearest neighbour group and reasons for high costs are not well understood, satisfaction is among the worst councils and performance is mixed as evidenced elsewhere in the report.
- 77 The service is not making effective use out of some of contractual arrangements. In the service level agreement for the outsourced building control arrangements, the Council did not take the opportunity to enhance its service delivery, capacity and resilience. It did not seek arrangements to enhance the weak service enforcement function by including conditions monitoring. As a result the service does not know whether development is being built in accordance with approved plans.

- 78 The management of value for money is underdeveloped and ineffective. For example, development control performance is inhibiting income generation potential such as charging for pre-application advice. Service cost benchmarking is in its infancy and performance comparison is limited. The service cannot demonstrate efficiency savings. Recharge levels are very high and reasons behind this are not well understood. There has been a lack of systematic analysis of alternative models for service delivery in weaker service areas such as development control and enforcement. Learning from others to improve effectiveness is limited - for example, from the highly successful building control partnership. Planning delivery grant levels have been low due to weak development control performance. However, funds have not been used effectively to address service weaknesses and longer term capacity issues. For example, currently there is £285,000 in a ring fenced fund which has built up over the last few years. The net expenditure for planning increased substantially between 2006/07 and 2007/08 from £1,409,700 to £1,790,453 in 2007/08 despite income increasing by 16 per cent and reasons behind this are not well understood. As a result, senior managers and councillors are unable to challenge the cost effectiveness of the service or identify how this could be improved.
- 79 However, there are some good examples of the service achieving high levels of external grant to deliver council objectives and extend service capacity. £1.07m has been secured to support St. Georges/Andrew's Plain enhancement scheme. The HERS scheme has received over £1m funding and the Council has used this to successfully grant aid a number of historic redundant buildings bringing them back into use and improving areas such as the Gildencroft Park, St Augustines Churchyard. The St Stephens Area Master Plan has been supported by £30,000 from local businesses. The GNDP has been successful at drawing in external funding and saved the planning service considerable sums through joint working on the evidence base to support the LDF.

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

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

- 80 The planning service has a mixed track record in delivering improvements. The service has been successful in achieving a growth point bid for the greater Norwich area with partners which provides access to additional government funding to improve infrastructure for the area to support future growth. LDF milestones have been largely met and slippage has only occurred to increase consultation deadlines and for factors outside the control of the council. The service successfully met initial government deadlines for the new national planning applications forms for the public. The service has sustained its investment in heritage despite a reduction in real terms in national grants and is a national pilot for the implementation of new heritage agreements ahead of impending legislation.
- 81 However, the Council's track record in terms of the time taken to determine planning applications is weak. The Council has been a government designated 'standards authority' for the poor speed in which it determines various categories of planning application over the last three years. In addition, user satisfaction with the planning service dropped from 73 per cent in 2003/04 to 52 per cent in 2006/07.
- 82 Historically, there has been a lack of corporate commitment to improving development control. As a result, the Council was unable to deliver its first Planning Improvement Plan (PIP) 2004/07. Ability to meet the PIP was undermined by poor leadership, a lack of corporate commitment and support, recruitment difficulties which led to a persistently high number of vacancies in the development management team and problems associated with the introduction of an electronic document management system for development management. The Council also failed to recruit to the key post of Development Control Manager between 2000 and March 2007. Failure to deliver the plan meant that there was no service improvement for users during this period and the council did not appreciate the role of planning in delivering wider objectives.
- 83 The Council is beginning to address some of the root causes of poor performance. There has been a realisation corporately that the planning service is vital to the growth agenda for Norwich and this has translated into increased corporate support and a commitment from the Chief Executive and the Leader of the Council to effect real improvement. The second PIP agreed in October 2007 has focused on the right priority actions. The plan identified over 70 tasks to deliver improvements across the whole planning service but prioritised six key areas for immediate improvement as follows.
- To have a full complement of staff by 31 January 2008.
  - Develop and implement a development team approach to dealing with planning applications.

- Adopt a project management approach to dealing with planning applications.
  - Improved pre-application service in place from December 2007.
  - Put in place a robust approach to validation of planning applications by April 2008.
  - Appoint a senior negotiator by December 2007.
- 84** Although there has been some success in meeting the priorities, there has been slippage against these timescales. There is now almost a full complement of staff, a new head of service started in February 2008 and a senior negotiator in March 2008. The Development Team, including officers from other Council departments, has been meeting since October 2007. The project management approach to planning applications is not yet fully in place, and projected improvements to the pre-application service have not been completed. This means that customer service in development control has not yet achieved the desired levels of performance.
- 85** The service is developing plans to address satisfaction issues but it is early days. The Council is seeking to measure customer satisfaction more systematically through use of improved IT systems rather than relying on surveys every three years. A Planning Forum, meeting every six months, has been recently introduced to improve dialogue with service users, agents and developers and this is beginning to identify further areas for service improvements. Systematic analysis of customer comments and complaints can inform the future development of the service.
- 86** Investment in electronic systems has not led to corresponding service improvement. Existing electronic systems do not meet the business needs of the service. The Council recognises that it has much unrealised potential in the use of IT systems and software but it has been unable to deliver improvements to increase its effectiveness. Staff regard existing systems as a barrier to improvement, in particular the cost of system improvements and the time it takes to achieve them. ICT provision is outsourced and the Council is undertaking a contract review with the provider at the present time.
- 87** The Council is improving the quality of design, through its own officers and with partners. There is a strong focus on the quality of development and the Council has introduced new policies to support this, including policies on conservation and sustainability. 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. These approaches are helping to retain the unique character of Norwich.

- 88 The planning service has not improved value for money over the last three years. While the Planning Policy and Conservation and Design elements of the service can demonstrate successes, Development Management has failed to achieve consistent service improvement. The net expenditure of the planning service inexplicably rose from £1,409,700 in 2006/07 to £1,790,453 in 2007/08, even though there were a considerable number of vacant posts during that period. This is compounded by the fact that the service has had Planning Delivery Grant (PDG), now totalling £285,000 sitting unused in a suspense account during this period. Part of this problem is attributable to historical limitations within the Finance function which are now being remedied. A clearer understanding of the costs of the service is beginning to develop and some high level benchmarking has been undertaken.
- 89 The Council has not had an effective procurement strategy which embraces the modern procurement framework. Purchasing and tender exercise have been undertaken within standing orders and financial regulations to achieve best market price but there has been little consideration of longer term costs or the opportunities for savings or greater efficiencies. Planning services have contracted out legal services because of the lack of internal capacity and the inability to recruit planning lawyers. However, neither the cost effectiveness or service responsiveness of this service has been reviewed on a regular or systematic basis, nor has the contract been actively performance managed. This has meant that neither officers nor councillors have been able to make value for money judgements about this service.
- 90 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. This is making a valuable contribution to the achievement of corporate priorities.

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

- 91 The service has a challenging longer term vision for what it wants to achieve for the area. It aims to provide an excellent service, giving a timely, relevant and high quality level of service and advice to customers. This vision and the specific objectives that emanate from it have clear links to the City of Norwich Partnership's draft community strategy. Planning has a key role to play in delivery of some of the Council's medium term objectives, particularly in relation to; delivering growth and development and promoting environmental sustainability and the delivery of more affordable homes. The planning service is also impacted by a number of the Council's cross cutting themes. The planning service plan is the key document in the delivery of this vision and these aims but it contains a number of weaknesses. Detailed financial information is limited and workforce planning is underdeveloped. Not all of the targets contained in the service plan are SMART and the number of objectives may be too demanding given the historical resource constraints upon the service. Service planning is not being used effectively to manage the use and allocation of resources within the service.

- 92** The service is self aware of its weaknesses and service improvement plans address what it needs to do to improve. The PIP is contained within the service plan and this does focus on most of the priority actions required to address key weaknesses in the services. Delivery of the PIP is currently project managed by an external consultant but it is envisaged that this will fall within normal service planning and performance management arrangements in due course. The Council is seeking to mainstream performance improvement as part of the normal performance management frameworks which enables it to take a whole service approach.
- 93** Leadership of the service and a focus on improvement is strengthening. The appointment of an interim Director for Regeneration and Development and a new Head of Service in February 2008, after a long period of change at a senior level, is providing a new sense of purpose. The Head of Planning Services has a clear focus on delivery of the PIP and developing a performance management culture within the planning service. The 2008/09 service plan is being revisited to make it a more realistic and deliverable plan and team plans are being developed to support that delivery. Senior managers in planning have had recent appraisals with clearer objectives and targets agreed. This sharpens the improvement focus.
- 94** Appraisals are beginning to be effective as a tool for personal and service development. Staff confirm that 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. Staff morale is good and there is a commitment to service improvement.
- 95** Greater Corporate priority is now attached to improvement of the planning service. The Council established a Performance Management Improvement Board (PMIB) in July 2007. Chaired by the Chief Executive it is designed to lead the 'Aiming for Excellence' programme and drive key improvements. The early focus for PMIB was on improving empty property turnaround times and improving recycling. Progress having been made on both those issues PMIB will now devote its energies to ensuring that the Planning Improvement Plan is delivered. This corporate prioritisation gives added impetus to planning improvement.
- 96** The planning service has an adequate performance management framework in place to deliver improvement but the historical absence of a performance management culture has rendered that ineffectual. In theory performance management flows through service planning, through team meetings and team plans, to performance management of individual responsibilities at one-to-one meetings and annual appraisals. In practice, there have been systemic weaknesses with each of these elements of the framework. The Head of Planning Services is now addressing each of these weaknesses. There are signs that performance improved in Development control between January and April 2008, but it is too early to judge whether these improvements are sustainable.

- 97 Scrutiny is not effectively driving service improvement within the planning service. Scrutiny was engaged in a review of the difficulties of recruitment and retention of planning staff, which ultimately led to the decision to improve planning salaries. However, many aspects of planning performance had been poor for a number of years and the first PIP had not been successful and effective Scrutiny could have increased the pressure for change.
- 98 The Council lacks clear plans and mechanisms to achieve efficiencies and VFM across services including planning. The Council has had problems with its accounting systems, particularly in relation to recharges, which have made it difficult to identify the true costs of the service. Costs of the planning service have increased year on year and there has been extensive use of consultants to cover for a number of vacant posts. The Council has now begun to develop high level VFM benchmarking information but it is too early to judge how valuable this exercise will be in understanding the costs of the service
- 99 Project management methodology is not yet embedded throughout the planning service. A corporate project management toolkit is available on the Intranet and tailored elements of the toolkit have been applied to smaller projects. The planning policy and projects team has applied a 'light touch' project management approach to monitoring progress on the management of Local Development Framework work streams. This has included a Project Initiation Document (PID) with a work programme; key milestones and resource requirements. Progress is reported monthly to the Regeneration Programme Coordinator who prepares an overview of LDF programme. Effective project management is not yet assisting with efficient use of resources.
- 100 The Council is improving its ability to learn from external challenge. It undertook a corporate Peer Review in February 2008 and has accepted the key recommendations. The planning service has welcomed this inspection and will use the key findings and recommendations to inform the next stage of the PIP. It has also sought to capture good practice on case management from a neighbouring council. However, these are isolated examples and the service has no infrastructure to make systematic use of complaints data to inform service improvement.
- 101 Plans are in place to address some corporate weaknesses that have to date inhibited improvement in the planning service. The Council is in negotiations to address corporate weaknesses in IT, including incompatibilities between corporate and service software. The Council has also recruited a new Head of Regeneration and Development to improve managerial leadership.

## Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 102** The Council has taken effective action to address staffing issues. It has overcome the difficulties of the highly competitive recruitment market for by a twin track strategy of increasing salary levels and adopting a 'grow your own' policy. Trainees are supported through continuing professional development by day release by improving capacity issues. There has been a conscious effort to recruit staff with a flexible approach and a positive attitude to performance improvement. Achieving adequate staffing levels has helped to relieve the workload pressures on staff and allowed backlogs, especially in development control, to be cleared.
- 103** The introduction of the development team approach has been successful in bolstering planning capacity and developing holistic solutions, particularly on major developments. It has also engendered better cross department relationships and a better understanding of respective roles.
- 104** Capacity at senior management level has been strengthened. Following on a review by consultants the Council has appointed a new Director of Regeneration and Development, due to start in June 2008 and created two new assistant director posts under him. The Head of Planning Services appointed in February 2008 will report to the Assistant Director (City Development). One of the prerequisites in the recruitment process was evidence of successes in developing a performance management culture. Corporately the council has introduced 'the leadership programme to enhance the capabilities of middle managers and this includes planning staff. This is a practical programme requiring participants to deliver an improvement project for their own service. This demonstrates the council's commitment to supplement both management numbers and capabilities.
- 105** Planning service change management skills are underdeveloped. For example, project management and process analysis skills are not strong although this is being addressed corporately. The Council has not carried out comprehensive business process re-engineering in development control and because of this, it cannot demonstrate that the processes are efficient and streamlined or that capacity is right for the workload or future workloads. Workforce planning is referenced in service plans but it is not well developed. Prospects for managing improvement effectively are uncertain.
- 106** Officer capacity is mixed and in places inconsistent. For example, there are inconsistencies in planning application officer reports and presentations to councillors and planning application site notes are not comprehensive or consistent. Officer training is more related to increasing knowledge rather than addressing and improving effectiveness and consistency of decision making. Outcomes for the public are unpredictable and uncertain.

- 107** Councillor capacity is inconsistent due to frequent changes of membership and inadequate training. This means that there is a variation in councillor training needs which need to be catered for. The impact of training is not systematically evaluated and 'job descriptions' for councillors to explain their role are not in place. Annual elections have meant that councillors have sometimes been denied the opportunity to develop their skills and experience and continuity has been lost. This is compounded by poor attendance at training events. Training for Councillors on probity and planning matters takes place at the start of the electoral year. There are further short training sessions of about 30 minutes on key topics prior to most, though not all, committee meetings. A design study visit is held each September to learn lessons from recently completed schemes in Norwich. A planning code of conduct was published in January 2008. This sets out the accountabilities of officers and councillors. It includes standards, procedures and protocols for councillors and officers involved in making decisions on planning applications. It also includes the Council's scheme of delegation to officers. The failure of councillors and officers to have complete role clarity can lead to inconsistent decision making.
- 108** The Council is self aware of these issues. The Council understands these weaknesses and plans to address the issues through training needs identified at appraisals and improvements to councillor training. Additional funding of £100,000 has been added to the corporate training budget for 2008/09 and planning services will receive a pro rata share of that fund to address training needs.
- 109** Service capacity is being extended at no cost to the service. The service uses skilled volunteers to progress projects through work placements at no cost to the council. For example, planning students are used to undertake the six monthly retail monitoring studies, and extend local consultation work on the LDF to address hard to reach and other groups in the community.
- 110** ICT is a barrier to more rapid service improvement. There have been historical problems relating to the implementation of workflow management but these have been overcome. There have been some recent small improvements but the ICT support provided by contract is perceived as cumbersome and an impediment to progress. The service is also considered by users to be expensive and not good value for money. The Council is aware of these concerns and seeking to address them as part of a formal contract review which is currently underway.
- 111** The Council developed a new medium term financial strategy in July 2007 but this was effectively too late to inform the 2007/08 budget. As a consequence the planning service plan lacks robust financial information and value for money targets. There are no efficiency targets either. The Head of Planning and the Finance Director are working on developing better understanding of planning budgets and improving budgetary control.

- 112** Planning services has been successful in leveraging in significant external funding to support capital schemes and enhance capacity. For example, the Heritage Economic Regeneration Scheme has attracted external funding of over £977,000 for a corresponding Council contribution of about £450,000. Skills in accessing external funding allow the Council to increase service contribution to regeneration activity.
- 113** Effective partnership working has supplemented capacity. The GNPD has contributed to the development of the evidence base to support the Local Development Framework; the CNC Building Control consultancy has emerged as a result of a partnership with Broadland and South Norfolk district councils. The Service level Agreement provides a very cost effective service for Norwich City Council in 2007/08 and at the same time generated an income share back to the Council. Through effective cross service working, the planning service has contributed to an increasing supply of affordable homes.
- 114** There is limited capacity in the legal section to support planning objectives. Current legal arrangements mean legal advice to the service is provided externally through a private legal practice in Cambridge. This means that there is some inflexibility, accessibility difficulties and a perceived lack of local knowledge. In addition, there are inherent risks in the dual role of the Head of Democratic Services monitoring role to the council and the provision of legal training and advice to the Planning Applications Committee. Current legal arrangements to support the service are not fully effective.
- 115** Training on human rights, diversity and equality is not reaching all areas of the service and there is no active monitoring of compliance other than through the annual staff survey. Training thus far has been top down and restricted to more senior staff or new starters as part of corporate induction. The planning service has an Equalities and Diversity Champion to champion this agenda, but this role has to be done in addition to the day and as a result limited progress has been made. The service also has identified performance, customer and consultation champions but their impact has also been very limited.