

WOKING BOROUGH COUNCIL

Comprehensive Performance Assessment



October 2003

Self Assessment Introduction

Setting the Scene

The place

Woking is situated in the heart of Surrey with approximately two thirds of the Borough in the Green Belt. But this is no typical Surrey town.

Instead, Woking is a dynamic and fast moving Borough that takes the lead on a number of national issues and is not timid about transforming itself in order to stay ahead.

A prime example would be in the area of environmental achievements, where Woking has been awarded the Queen's Award for Enterprise; the only local authority in the Country to hold this prestigious award.

The Town owes its prosperity to the coming of the railway, the advent of technology and the entrepreneurial ambition of the people who settled here. Communications, ambition and technology remain essential features of the town's character and the Council's outlook.

In recent years, the Town has undergone two major transformations. The first was in the 1970s, with massive investment in housing, offices, shops, roads and leisure facilities. The second has been in progress for the last fifteen years with new shops, entertainment and leisure facilities, the growth of business and investment in the housing stock across the Borough.

With its combination of an attractive environment, excellent transport links by rail, air and road, and the locally high standards of education and business support, the Borough is regarded as a quality location in which to live and work. But development pressures and traffic demands need to be constantly and sensitively balanced against the interests of the environment.

Living in Woking

The majority of our residents live in a well-defined urban area. In addition to Woking town centre there are 14 separate residential communities within the Borough. These range from the rural Sutton Green in the south west, bordering neighbouring Guildford Borough, to areas of growth such as Knaphill in the north-west where over 600 new houses have been built in the past two years, and West Byfleet and Byfleet in the east, both well-established communities close to the M25 with a thriving mix of residential and business development. Extensive areas of low density and modern planned housing are located in Goldsworth Park, a residential estate built in the late 1970s and the 1980s.

We have a high quality mixed residential housing stock of 37,879 households, with a 9% increase in the number of dwellings over the past 11 years. In terms of housing tenure, 77% are owner occupied, of which 30% are owned outright, 8.5% are private tenants, 9% are council tenants and 3% Housing Association tenants. The average cost of all types of dwelling in Woking was £237,988. There has been a 63% increase in house prices in Woking between 1998 and 2002. Our Housing Needs Survey in 2002 showed that need far exceeds supply of affordable homes, identifying a further 1,922 social rented affordable homes which would be required over the next five years. **Due to the extensive Green Belt, high land values and a scarcity of sites, achievement of the Council's affordable housing target is a significant challenge.**

Self Assessment Introduction

Population, community, economy

The 2001 census found Woking had a population of 89,840 - a 3.7% increase on 1991 figures - with 64.8% of the total aged between 16 and 64. Work undertaken in 1994 to consider options for local government in Surrey identified Woking as a natural community. There is a strong sense of local identity - community identity in Surrey was shown to peak in Woking, with 80% of the Borough's residents referring to Woking as their town or nearest town.

Data from the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2000 shows that, economically speaking, within Surrey, our wards are spread across the entire spectrum. Both West Byfleet and Pyrford feature in the "best" 20 wards in the county, while Sheerwater comes out as the most deprived ward in Surrey, with Central and Maybury ranked as third most deprived. The remaining wards fall in between these two extremes.

There are over 44,000 jobs in the Borough. The main employment sectors are services (35% of jobs), distribution, hotels and restaurants (23%), public administration and health (16%) and manufacturing (8.5%), which, mirroring the national economy, has been declining in recent years. Many leading companies are based here, including Formula 1 manufacturers Tag McLaren Group; management and IT consulting firm Cap Gemini Ernst and Young; Telewest; Royal Blue and The Ambassador Theatre Group. We are also home to a thriving range of diverse smaller businesses. Unemployment levels are very low at around 1% which is significantly lower than the national rate of 2.6%. The average household income is £36,100 compared with the national average £26,200 (CACI 2002 Wealth of the Nation report) and the number of job vacancies exceeds the numbers of registered unemployed but

the shortfall between mortgage (average income X 3.5) and the average price of a dwelling is around £100,000. The Housing Needs Survey exposed significant variations across the Borough within these averages, with 70% of households having an income at or below the average and some 26% having an income below £10,500. Lower income levels are more prevalent in the east of the Borough.

Representatives of local business support agencies have indicated that the key challenges currently facing our businesses include labour and skills shortages/mismatches, congestion, pockets of disadvantage and under achievement, high housing costs which deter the migration of labour from other areas and constraints upon physical development. The 2001 census found that 73.2% of the population aged 16 - 74 were economically active, and 74.1% were employed in the top five occupational categories.

Ethnicity

Multi-culturally diverse Woking has a long history of welcoming people from other countries to settle here. In the 19th Century it became the location for the Oriental Institute, a college for young Muslim students which resulted in the founding nearby of the first mosque in Britain, the Shah Jahan. These links provided a natural focal point for emigrants from Pakistan who relocated to Woking in the mid 1950s and whose descendants now live in Maybury and Sheerwater. The Borough also has a thriving Italian community, many of whom were attracted to settle here by the opportunity to work in the market gardens at one time so prolific here. Over 10 other nationalities are also represented including Indian, Chinese, Spanish and Philippino. 8.7% of our residents were recorded at the 2001 census as non-white, with more than half (5.8%) recorded as Asian or Asian British.

Self Assessment Introduction

The Council

Woking Borough Council is a district authority situated within the County of Surrey. The Borough Council has 36 elected members. The current political composition is 17 Conservative, 12 Liberal Democrat, 6 Labour and 1 Independent.

The Council has adopted the Leader with Cabinet model of executive arrangements and currently has a single party Executive of seven Conservative members, each with their own portfolio responsibilities. The Council has appointed a Leader of the Executive.

The Council has three Overview and Scrutiny Committees - Economic, Social and Environmental - which establish panels to undertake scrutiny and policy reviews. There are three regulatory Committees - Planning Committee, Licensing Committee and an Appeals Committee. We also have a Standards Committee of eight members including two independent members and one parish representative.

The Borough has one parish, Byfleet Parish Council and one Member of Parliament.

Our resources

The Council is one of the largest employers in the area. There are 650 people employed by the Council across nine Service Areas, led by the Chief Executive and two Executive Directors, supported by nine Service Heads. The majority are based at the Civic Offices and at Woking Leisure Centre and Pools. Other teams are located at our sheltered and supported housing sites, three community centres, the H.G. Wells Conference and Events Centre and the Visitor Information Centre.

Our net budget in 2003/4 is £12.2 million. 49% of expenditure is now funded by Government, compared to 66% in 1995/6. Since December 2001, we have had debt free status.

	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04
	£M	£M	£M
Budget Requirement	11.3	11.8	12.2
Council Tax at Band D	£144.63	£151.11	£159.12
% Council Tax Increase from Previous Years	6.1%	4.5%	5.3%
Capital Programme	9.5	10.3	19.0
Revenue Reserves	6.9	11.0	7.5

Self Assessment Introduction

The culture

External scrutiny, such as the I&DeA peer group review, endorses our role as community leaders. We are recognised as the catalyst in securing practical regeneration schemes of real benefit to the community, and have been commended for our visionary approach to the sustainability of the area. The Senior Management Team is described as "strong and well-respected" and commanding the confidence of external partners to "get things done".

The I&DeA review also praised the "can do" culture amongst staff, their sense of pride in the Council and their commitment to innovation. Staff are encouraged to experiment with new and better ways of working and have devised many imaginative ways of delivering better services. There is a strong emphasis on customer service and partnership working. This is backed up by widespread consultation with the community, and a desire to understand customer needs.

Being thoughtful, imaginative and unafraid to experiment can only happen when there are secure building blocks in place. **To this end, the Council has provided the right foundations by ensuring there is a sound financial base to work from, a climate of investment rather than financial fire fighting, and good core services.** Robust internal systems allow us to set targets, define our priorities, measure progress and take action where required. The Council has been an Investor in People since 1996 and invests significantly in staff development and training.

Comprehensive Performance Assessment

Corporate Assessment

This is the Council's own Corporate Assessment within the framework of CPA. It focuses on four key questions and describes progress in the planning and delivery of key priorities to improve services for local people.

1 What is the Council trying to achieve?

Ambitions

Our aims for the Borough are clear and specific. We want to secure the social, economic and environmental well-being of the borough for those who live and work here, and we want to do it in a way that is forward thinking and sustainable.

After extensive consultation with partners and the community, we published our Community Strategy in 2002. This sets out our community aims, which are:

- a strong **community spirit** with a clear sense of belonging and responsibility
- a clean, healthy and safe **environment**
- a **transport** system that is integrated and accessible, recognising Woking's potential as a transport hub
- access to **decent and affordable housing** for local people and key workers
- a community which values **personal health and well-being**
- integrated and accessible **local facilities and services**

For each aim there is a list of priorities and targets. These are fed through into our business planning processes. We have also developed key performance indicators to reflect the targets in the Community Strategy. These are monitored via our performance management systems and will be reported on in our Best Value Performance Plan.

We want to involve the whole of the Woking community in the delivery of these targets. However, we still have some way to go to make the Strategy one that is owned by our partners and need to bring other members and groups in the community on board. The Local Strategic Partnership is being strengthened, and we are building a network of groups to ensure wider participation in the development, delivery and monitoring of the Community Strategy. This work is detailed in our answer to Question 4.

1 What is the Council trying to achieve?

The work of the whole Council is informed by our vision and values statement, published in Spring 2003. Our vision, **Towards Tomorrow Today**, encourages staff to be forward thinking, and to prepare for the needs of tomorrow through providing high class, excellent day to day services. **The values are:**

- Serving the public
- Being fair
- Communicating well
- Delivering quality
- Managing ourselves
- Thinking innovatively
- Learning and developing
- Celebrating success

Our ethos is of one organisation, in the public service. We care about the people of the Borough and strive to achieve excellence, through innovation. High standards of customer service are implicit in all that we do. The many achievements listed in response to question 2 show how these themes run through our work.

Priorities

Our top priorities are **decent and affordable housing**, the **environment** and the contribution that **leisure** and community services make to **health and well-being**. Some of our most innovative thinking and most outstanding achievements are in these areas. (See Climate Change case study).

Case Study | Climate Change - innovative solutions to one of the world's biggest problems

Woking's Climate Change Strategy covers the whole spectrum of the Borough's energy uses - power, heat, water, waste disposal and transport. The strategy includes proposals for recycling and reducing waste and recovering energy through anaerobic digestion and gasification.

The Council's 'zero waste' strategy seeks to reduce the amount of waste going to landfill to less than 10% of its original weight. If our plans for a waste processing plant by 2007 are successful, this will make a significant impact not just on the amount of landfill required, but also on our CO₂ emissions. A pilot wheeled bin collection of waste is due to start in 2004, with full scale implementation planned for 2005.

We are currently rated as the highest HECA achiever in the South East and we have already achieved an 8% reduction in CO₂ emissions compared to 1990 levels. We have also been granted the Queen's Award for Enterprise in recognition of our sustainability practices.

Professor Sir Tom Blundell, Chair of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, has endorsed Woking's approach saying "Woking Council has produced a wide ranging programme that should enable it to meet targets of this scale which builds on the impressive range of programmes it already has in place."

1 What is the Council trying to achieve?

Our priorities are clear, rooted in the Community Strategy and drawn up after extensive consultation. There are a great many ways we listen to our customers, service users and stakeholders, including interviews and surveys, meeting people face to face through, for example, the Borough road show, and the Citizen's Panel, which is consulted every two or three months. We also have a Youth Council, established this year after looking at how successful Youth Councils operate elsewhere, to ensure the voice of students and young people in the Borough does not go unheard. Our work on consultation has this year been "Highly Commended" in the prestigious Institute of Public Relations Excellence in Communications Awards (See Consultation case study). Examples of how services respond to the priorities are contained in the answer to Question 2.

Our focus on what is a priority (and what is not) has changed. The successful regeneration of the Town Centre (the development of the Peacocks, the securing of a quality hotel etc.) has permitted us to be less concerned with economic development and more concerned with quality of life considerations. We follow a forward financial strategy, evidenced in the reports to the Executive of 26 June and 4 September 2003, which has successfully found additional resources for priority areas by adjusting management arrangements, improving processes, making better use of procurement and using resources more effectively.

Case Study | Consultation - getting buy-in from local residents

Consultation is a key part of the communications mix at Woking and we use a variety of different techniques, tailored to each individual campaign.

The Institute of Public Relations has recognised Woking's commitment to consultation through its Excellence in Communications Award Scheme, which this year commended the following consultations:

Heaven is a Half-pipe - we wanted to stop young people skateboarding in the town centre and asked them to help us design a new skate park. **Outcome: a new skate park designed by the customers for them to use instead of the town centre.**

Westfield Tip - we asked residents to tell us what they thought we should do with a former waste tip site that had been a source of controversy and dissatisfaction in the past. We acted on the results. **Outcome: a contentious situation diffused, a solution to a flooding problem and Councillors committed to explore public requirements further.**

Woking Town Square - a consultation that asked residents what they thought of our proposals to improve the Town Square. **Outcome: A large number of responses and support for the plans, and a new policy for its usage.**

The Woking Citizens' Panel/Youth Council - a representative sample of 1400 people, refreshed each year by a third. Members receive four in-depth questionnaires a year. A newsletter for panel members, Talkback, reports feedback. A separate **Youth Council** ensures we can listen and respond to the views of younger people.

1 What is the Council trying to achieve?

Focus

We have the ability to sustain our focus on priorities. Emergencies (like local flooding) will occur, and we deal with them, but they do not distract us from what really matters to local communities. Our recent adoption of a Vision and Values will reinforce our focus, give point and purpose to everything we do and bring greater clarity of direction to the work of the Council. Minor operational matters and crises will not deflect us from the need to deliver on agreed priorities. To this end:-

- agenda of monthly Management Team/Service Heads meeting address key corporate priorities
- performance monitoring ('Green Book') a constant item on above agenda
- effective and advanced Forward Planning for work of Executive
- work programmes for Overview and Scrutiny Committees reviewed at each meeting

To keep a check on how well we are implementing Council decisions, we have developed a decision tracking tool called "Shikari" (a Hindu word meaning "hunter-guide"). This software will help us to track the current status of decisions and actions throughout the organisation.

2 How has the Council set about delivering its priorities?

Capacity

The Council moved to executive style arrangements in May 2000, making us early modernisers. In May 2002, following extensive consultation, we introduced a '**Leader and Executive**' style of governance. Subsequently in 2003 individual Executive members were given political accountability for specific service area portfolios. We have also developed our new **Constitution**, outlining clearly the responsibilities of members and officers.

It was important that changes in political management did not take place in isolation. A new officer structure was introduced in May 2000, and has since been refined, to facilitate networking across services and to enable the Council to focus more clearly on the needs of the customer.

Our new governance arrangements are settling in and beginning to make a difference to the way we work. For example, the naming of portfolio holders has sharpened accountability and helped make the roles of the various Executive members clearer. Forward planning is more robust and Executive decisions are delivered electronically to all members within 24 hours.

In April 2003 we reviewed our three Overview and Scrutiny Committees, using independent analysis, questionnaires to members and officers and a series of one to one interviews culminating in a workshop evening run by South East Employers.

The review led to a number of improvements including pre-decision scrutiny, better arrangements for officer support, action plans and twelve month work programmes for each Committee and the introduction of criteria to monitor progress. This year the Overview and Scrutiny Committees have made a mixed allocation

of Chairs/Vice-Chairs from amongst the political groups, which is contributing to wider participation and stronger scrutiny.

We have an active and effective **Standards Committee**. The Committee has interested itself in all the ethical components of the new system, receiving reports and making representations to Government about a range of matters. It enjoys a remit beyond its prescribed statutory functions and it continues to actively lead on participative training for all members and co-optees.

Our financial stability frees us up to be imaginative in how we achieve our aims and the key strategic building blocks are in place for us to use our financial resources to best effect.

In December 2001, the Council repaid all of its long-term borrowing and achieved debt free status. The money that was previously earmarked for debt repayment can now be used as part of our capital programme.

Capital is allocated from a single capital pot, in line with the **Capital Strategy** and the **Asset Management Plan**. These in turn look to the Community Strategy to help prioritise resources. In addition, every year we develop and approve a five year investment programme, which is carefully planned to meet corporate needs and priorities. A members' working group feeds into this process. The Council's Capital Strategy has been assessed as 'Good' by GOSE and no longer has to be submitted for assessment.

In a recent **Standard and Poor's Financial Appraisal we achieved an AA Stable rating** - endorsement of the fact that we are now ready to receive greater freedom and flexibility from Government in the management of our financial affairs.

2 How has the Council set about delivering its priorities?

Managing Our Staff

Feedback from the last employee survey (in 1999) told us that staff satisfaction is high, and that people working for Woking feel committed and motivated. We are aware however, that managing change is a continuing challenge to the maintenance of focussed and committed staff (See Community Services Review case study - pg 12) and more now needs to be done. We surveyed our employees again in October this year. Our survey on internal communications in 2001 indicated 91% of staff are clear about the job objectives they have to achieve; over 80% know their team's objectives.

Our commitment to maintain IIP accreditation underpins our objective to ensure staff are properly trained and developed. But we have more to do if we are to manage our people most effectively. Our newly developed **People Strategy** will help us in this. We do, however, recognise the need to plan and identify staffing needs more precisely, as may be articulated in a Workforce Development Plan. Last year, we reduced the average staff sickness from 9.1 days a year to 8.4 and we want to reduce this still further.

Working in Partnerships

Many of our priorities can only be delivered by working in partnership with others. Our partnerships help us to better understand and meet the needs of people in the community. There are numerous partnerships operating in Woking. These include:

Thamesway Energy Ltd - a joint venture energy company between the Council and Danish green

energy company ESCO International. The partnership concentrates on developing "green" energy sources. Projects are financed with shareholding capital and private finance. Project development is carried out jointly. The work of the company makes a significant contribution to the Council's Climate Change Strategy.

The Sheerwater Maybury Partnership - we set up this SRB partnership in 1996 to help people in this deprived area help themselves. The project was commended by the local development agency (SEEDA) as the best of its kind. Although SRB funding has ended, the partnership continues to function with support from the Council.

Health Partnerships - we have a long track record of working with partners in health. The innovative Healthy Woking Partnership led to a successful GP exercise referral scheme and the experience gained underpins the more recent FAME project (See FAME case study).

The Safer Woking Partnership - using a joint problem solving approach, and joint funding, to tackle crime and disorder.

The Community Legal Services Partnership - a collection of local providers offering legal advice and services to organisations and the community.

The Town Centre Initiative - involving representatives of businesses (providing their own funding) and the public sector

The Woking Access Group - comprising representatives from voluntary groups as well as the Borough Council, constantly monitors access into and inside shops, the positioning and suitability of street furniture as well as dropped kerb and tactile surfaces to ensure that the needs of those who require additional consideration are being met. (See Access case study)

2 How has the Council set about delivering its priorities?

Local Agenda 21 - a thriving example of partnership working and cooperation; helped in the production of the sustainability checklist and 'Green Pages' (a comprehensive directory of green resources) and our partners in numerous public forums held each year.

Surrey e-Partnership - e-service delivery involving county-wide public sector organisations. Work developed includes Surrey Alert, a pathfinder project for emergency planning, Surrey Jobs.info, an access channel for public sector jobs in Surrey, and Surrey Online, a portal website giving joined-up information on local services.

Case Study | FAME - improving services to vulnerable older people

While we are working on a number of fronts to provide better and more joined up services, we have, through the FAME project, placed a special emphasis on services for vulnerable older people.

A consortium of councils (Woking, Surrey, Bromley and the Wirral) has been jointly awarded £1.43 million by the ODPM to explore ways of sharing information and developing systems to improve services and protect vulnerable older people.

The Council is developing a confidential computer based network for staff in housing, social services and health so that they can quickly and easily find out about their vulnerable and elderly clients. Through sharing data across these areas the Council hopes to develop better "packages" of health and social care, keep vulnerable older people out of hospital and reduce the number of delayed discharges.

Other benefits include better co-ordination of information about community based health treatment, housing adaptations for those with special needs, improved access to advice on benefits, Care Line facilities, sheltered housing provision, and statutory and voluntary carer services. Learning from this project will be shared with other health and social care partnerships throughout the UK.

Case Study | Access - making sure everybody can get about in Woking

Woking has long asserted that everybody should be able to get easily around the town centre. The Town's shopMobility scheme was one of the first in the UK. The Council played a leading part in setting up the facility and was responsible for the design of the shopMobility logo that is now used nationally. In the 1990s the main town centre was totally pedestrianised.

People with mobility difficulties can travel around in a number of different ways. There are low-rise accessible buses, special parking spaces for disabled drivers in car parks and on street, and a Dial a Bus service. The free Town Centre Buggy, operating on a hail and ride basis, was introduced by the Council and is now funded by Friends of the Elderly and Surrey County Council.

The Woking Access Group, made up of the Council and local voluntary groups, constantly monitors access into and inside shops, the positioning and suitability of street furniture as well as dropped kerbs and tactile surfaces.

Performance Management

Our business planning process has been in place for many years and follows an annual cycle of target setting, performance and review. This process is informed by a number of influences, including

- Consultations with our public
- The Community Strategy
- Government initiatives
- Reviews and performance monitoring
- The annual Audit letter
- Best Value reviews and inspections
- The I&DeA peer reviews

The targeting of resources against priorities is central to the annual business planning process. Service Area Plans (and the individual Service Plans that lie beneath them) provide clear links with the Community Strategy. Priorities are identified, costed and reviewed by the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee and considered by the Executive. The involvement of overview and scrutiny, combined with the setting of the forward financial strategy by full Council, enables

2 How has the Council set about delivering its priorities?

all members to play a central part in the business planning process.

We list our corporate aims, objectives, performance information and targets in the **Service and Performance (Best Value) Plan**.

All nine Service Areas produce a Service Plan, in a standard format, which is incorporated into one single document and made available both on the web and in printed form. Thus members, officers and the public have a single source of policy, planning, budgetary and performance information. A summary version of the Service and Performance (Best Value) Plan, "Working for Woking", is produced and sent to every resident and business.

The performance monitoring process is continuous. In October/November each year members discuss progress against targets and decide what their priorities will be for the coming year. Members agree performance targets and key performance indicators so that we can check on how well we are doing in reaching the Community Strategy targets.

Every month we publish the Green Book, containing information about our performance against all of our performance indicators. This is placed on the intranet and circulated to members, service heads and the corporate management team. The rapid publication of relevant and timely performance indicators allows us to see where services may need attention or early remedial action.

We recognise, however, that it is not necessarily possible to measure whether life is improving for local people through the current range of performance indicators. We have therefore been working with the Audit Commission to develop some **Quality of Life indicators**. Work on this continues.

Case Study | Community Services Review

As part of the implementation of the Best Value Improvement Plan for Leisure, colleagues in Community Services are undergoing a review of organisational arrangements. Change is always unsettling for colleagues and whilst we acknowledge the adverse impact this can have on morale the reality for local government today is that change is the only certainty.

The focus of the proposed changes is to assess organisational objectives against two themes: Health & Fitness Development and Community Engagement. This is proposed in order to enable the Council to contribute to the achievement of the Community Strategy objectives of "Valuing Personal Health & Wellbeing" and "Sense of Community Spirit".

Case Study | Maybury and Sheerwater - tackling the root causes of disadvantage

In 1996 the Sheerwater-Maybury Partnership won £3.4 million of Government funding for an ambitious regeneration project in Surrey's most disadvantaged area.

The SRB scheme aimed to tackle the root causes of disadvantage and provide fresh opportunities to local residents.

The Council led the bid and built the original partnership, remaining a major partner and providing high level support throughout. Significantly, over 60% of partnership board members were based in the community. Two thirds of board members were resident in the partnership area. This was, therefore, a true community led partnership.

Over six years the partnership created 31 new jobs, helped 225 local people gain a recognised qualification, advised 318 local businesses and stimulated 564 volunteers to become involved in their local area. Most targets have been achieved, or are very close to being achieved. Financially, the partnership brought £5.6 million extra to the area in match funding.

Now that the SRB funding has finished, the Council is helping the partnership to become an independent charitable company.

The Sheerwater-Maybury Partnership remains the first and only full regeneration scheme in Surrey funded through a major Government funding regime and has been recognised by SEEDA as the best SRB partnership in the area.

3 What has the Council achieved / not achieved to date?

Better Quality Services

Customer satisfaction is high. The percentage of customers satisfied with the overall service provided by the Council is in the top quartile. Our aim is to increase satisfaction levels and remain in the top quartile.

We are continuing to invest in high levels of customer service. In addition to our well-used One Stop Shop, we have opened a new neighbourhood office in Sheerwater and set up a new single point of contact centre for people wanting to deal with us over the phone. We are in the early stages of implementing a contact manager system to allow people to receive information and services when and how they want them.

In June 2002 we asked independent private sector consultants Qci to carry out an assessment of customer service in the Council, using the CMATTM Customer Management Assessment Tool. We achieved a score of 42% in the assessment, against the public sector benchmark of 24% and the private sector benchmark of 33%.

The Council recognises that we should be doubly determined to provide the best service we can to those most in need. This is demonstrated by our benefits services where we have made considerable improvements in how we handle claims. Time to process new benefits claims, for example, has seen a 49% improvement in just over two years. Time to process changed benefit claims is improved by 73% and benefits renewals processed on time is up by 32%. In all of these indicators we are now in the top quartile. We have also recently run a benefit take up campaign to ensure that nobody who is entitled to benefit misses out. (See Benefits case study).

Case Study | Benefits - Get a Free Wealth Check

Many people are unaware of the range of benefits they can claim, especially people who do not receive any benefits at all. So in June 2003 we joined forces with the Citizens Advice Bureau to run a "Get a Free Wealth Check" campaign.

A press and publicity campaign encouraged residents, especially older people, to call a local help-line number or drop into a local centre where staff from our benefits team and our customer service team were on hand to give advice.

Over 219 people not previously claiming benefit are now better off with over £150,000 of additional benefit identified. There are now plans for a repeated campaign to raise the profile and awareness of benefits issues.

We have made significant progress on our key priorities.

Environment

Woking's green achievements have been recognised by a Queen's Award for Enterprise; we are the only local authority to hold this prestigious award. We are also the only authority to have adopted a comprehensive Climate Change Strategy that is currently deemed as likely to meet the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution targets. We developed the first local sustainable combined heat, cooling and power stations in the Country. We have developed a number of energy and water saving techniques for Council owned buildings and public places, and have achieved our ten-year target to reduce energy consumption by 40%. Woking boasts the largest concentration of solar electricity installations in the Country.

We have installed the first commercial fuel cell in the UK in Woking Park, providing valuable green energy for heating and lighting systems in the pool and leisure centre with scope for surplus electricity to be exported to the Council's sheltered housing schemes.

3 What has the Council achieved / not achieved to date?

The heat produced also provides air conditioning, cooling and dehumidification requirements via heat fired absorption cooling and there are no emissions except pure water.

We take Sustainable Development seriously, and in partnership with the local community published the Local Agenda 21 Action Plan in 1998. Since then, the Local Agenda 21 Group (a partnership between the Council, its members, and various representatives from the community) have delivered a series of projects and events that have brought sustainable development to the forefront of people's thinking. A recent public debate on GM food attracted widespread publicity, including coverage on the BBC's national 6 O'clock News programme. Other initiatives have raised awareness about issues ranging from Climate Change to Environmentally Friendly Gardening. The Publication of 'Woking Green Pages' in 2002 took the theme of Sustainable Living to all households in the Borough.

In an area like Woking, with its good links to London and the rest of the South East, there is invariably pressure on us for development. We have successfully used our planning powers to safeguard the Green Belt, consistently achieving high levels of brown field development well above Government and local targets.

We are also working to cut down on road use. In particular we have collaborated with other local authorities and businesses to gain Government approval for Airtrack - a plan which will make Woking a sustainable hub for improved rail links to Heathrow and the north, avoiding London, from Surrey, Hampshire and the South West. The plan has been incorporated into the strategic plans of the Strategic Rail Authority and is supported by, amongst others, the Mayor of London and SEEDA. This will help to enhance Woking's current status as a transport hub in the regional transport strategy.

Housing

We are not unique in facing a shortage of affordable housing. But we are doing something about it. The Full House scheme encourages existing and prospective landlords to invest in properties that they then lease to the Council for between two and twenty five years. The scheme was launched in April 2003 to a huge amount of interest, which is ongoing. In the first four months since the launch there were over 300 enquiries about the scheme, and we are viewing approximately 20 properties a month with a view to taking them on. Currently there are fourteen properties already signed up, with a further four subject to contract. Some of these are larger four bedroom properties - usually the most difficult for the Council to supply from its own stock.

We work with 23 Registered Social Landlords, and have selected eight of these as preferred partners. The preferred partner scheme allows us to obtain better value for money, and a higher standard of service for our tenants, whilst encouraging the selected landlords to maintain a long term investment in Woking. The preferred partner group is vital for the continued delivery of social housing development within the Borough, especially in the light of uncertain future Government funding.

In 2002, Surrey County Council published its draft Spatial Strategy. This proposed building 2,000 homes on Green Belt land in Woking to meet Government housing requirements for Surrey.

We wanted to know how local people felt about this proposal. So we consulted residents, putting four options to them as possible solutions. The feedback showed an acceptance that Woking needs to grow, but a lack of support for major growth and considerable concern over loss of Green Belt land and the pressure any development would place on the existing infrastructure. There was, however, an acceptance of the need for more affordable

3 What has the Council achieved / not achieved to date?

housing and a clear desire for further consultation and involvement in future planning proposals. We will therefore take these results into account when considering any other proposals for major development in the Borough.

We have worked with Surrey County Council to find an acceptable way of addressing these issues and are now signed up to overall housing numbers. We are also using supplementary planning guidance to help us meet as many of the housing needs identified in our Housing Strategy as possible. The period between April 2000 and April 2003 has seen the completion of 70 affordable dwellings in the Borough secured through the planning process, with 70 under construction and planning permission granted for a further 124 dwellings.

Leisure: Health and Well-Being

We want to encourage as many people as possible to participate in leisure and cultural activities with a view to improving general health and well-being in the Borough and are currently in negotiations to open up and extend leisure facilities in three of the Borough's schools.

We are developing the Cultural Strategy, built on the results of consultation with residents and stakeholders. The Strategy will be adopted in early 2004.

In the 1990s we joined forces with the Ambassadors Group (ATG), and worked with them on the refurbishment of Woking's two theatres and six screen cinema. We continue to work with ATG to create opportunities for community and voluntary organisations to develop and display their work. We have extended access to ATG venues through our commercially successful Passport to Leisure scheme. Our subsidy is equal to 40p per seat, compared with similar local authority subsidies

between £2.18 and £3.55 per seat. The theatres attract over 350,000 visitors per year. In January 2002 the Audit Commission's Best Value inspection report on Arts, Leisure and Recreation in Woking rated the provision of theatre facilities as excellent, saying "Woking has some very high quality facilities in which the Council has made substantial investment - particularly the Ambassadors Theatre complex, the HG Wells Conference and Events Centre and the 'Sensations' facility for disabled people in the Leisure Centre and the Pool in the Park". We also work with the Woking Galleries on the Museum and Arts & Crafts Centre development, providing both capital assistance and land for The Galleries, plus revenue support when necessary.

We help a wide range of sporting organisations, both financially and in other ways. We support a local Football in the Community initiative run in partnership between Woking Football Club and other smaller football clubs in the area.

We have agreed an extensive programme to upgrade young children's play facilities across the Borough, and are currently looking for a commercial partner to undertake this long term project. We have already found a commercial partner to develop play facilities for older children. Following consultation, we are installing the first enhanced youth play facility in Woking Park.

In 1999 we opened a new community centre, The Vyne, incorporating a GP's surgery for the Primary Care Trust. As well as providing facilities for elderly people, the centre runs mother and toddler sessions and is widely used by the community. Joint provision of facilities incorporating doctors' surgeries have also been achieved at Alpha Road Community Hall and Sheerwater Community Centre.

The Council's 'Purple Pages' directory contains details of Borough-wide services for over 50s and is further evidence of how the Council perceives its role as a community leader and facilitator.

3 What has the Council achieved / not achieved to date?

Improvements in performance...

Over the past two years we have made significant improvements to our performance on a number of performance indicators, for example:

- Invoices paid on time - 15% improvement, now in top quartile
- Vacant private sector dwellings returned to occupation - 19% improvement
- Housing rent collected - 3% improvement, now in top quartile
- Appointments for repairs made and kept - 25% improvement, now in top quartile
- Household waste recycled - 2.4% improvement, now in top quartile
- Homes built on previously developed land - 9% improvement, in top quartile
- Minor and other planning applications decided - 20% improvement
- Reduced energy consumption and pollutants by over 40% in ten years (in excess of local target)

...but more work is required in these areas

We know from our performance monitoring that some areas need to improve:

In housing we need to be quicker in deciding homeless applications. We must reduce the average length of stays in bed and breakfast accommodation and cut down on the time taken to redecorate and re-let council houses. We are undertaking a major study of how to make better use of hard-to-let sheltered properties. We are working on the design of affordable housing, providing more support to the Borough's Night Shelter and encouraging greater tenant and leaseholder participation. We are also re-thinking

how we organise our day-to-day and planned maintenance repairs, with a new contract due to start in April 2004.

The performance of the refuse collection service had been good up to 2002/03. But then the contractor ran into difficulties, resulting in more missed bins and a rise in complaints. We put a recovery plan in place to improve on this. We will now renew our efforts to achieve top quartile performance.

Problems with another contractor also meant that our standards of cleanliness in public areas slipped. This was particularly frustrating, given the previous excellent performance and standards that contributed to successive 'Britain In Bloom' awards. Again we brought in a recovery plan, with associated resources, and an innovative partnership arrangement started in April 2003 with another company, SERCO. Additional performance measures are now in place to monitor improvements, and we have put together a team of neighbourhood officers to work out in the community.

Best Value continues to be one of the ways in which we identify and make improvements. We have completed 10 Best Value reviews with 342 different improvement actions contained in our improvement plans. 85% of improvements are completed or on target. 4% are no longer applicable. Delivery of improvement plans is monitored corporately, through the Members' Best Value Review Panel and the Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

Our Peer Challenge this month confirmed that improvements had been achieved as a result of studying and using performance management information. If our monitoring information indicates any decline in service, we will investigate the reasons and apply a recovery plan.

In 2001, the I&DeA peer review prompted us to think about risk management. We recognised that we did not assess risk in a strategic or systematic way. We have therefore embarked on a project to help us examine risk not just at the strategic and corporate level, but across the whole range of our services and activities. This process is being carried out with the help of an external consultant with a view to developing a Risk Management Strategy.

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

Woking is a busy and progressive authority, committed to achieving excellence through innovation, and to addressing the needs of tomorrow, based on the good work it is already doing. We can demonstrate sound financial performance management and a track record of achievement in service delivery, partnership working and the successful development of the Borough. We recognise, however, that there is more to do, in a number of areas, all of which are documented in relevant Improvement Plans.

We acknowledge that much of our achievement has been on a service-by-service basis. Our employees are skilled, enthusiastic, expert and empowered to make changes and innovations to their services. We need to find ways to use this energy to further the corporate aims and objectives. This is not to say that there is no overall corporate direction. There are clear policy objectives and officers are easily able to tell whether a proposition is in line with the Council's purposes or not. However, we must become better at articulating the corporate vision, and achieving better synergy, and thus better outcomes, from the work that happens at service level.

The building blocks are already in place for us to do this, starting with our vision and values statement. We have also refined our business

planning processes so that our key performance indicators reflect the themes of the Community Strategy. Our Best Value Performance Plan for 2004/2005 will clearly reference performance indicators for services with the aims of the Community Strategy. In our Action Plan, prepared as part of this assessment, we have considered our challenges for the next 3 years, what is likely to change and what targets we must set ourselves. Informed by our Peer Challenge this month, we recognise that the Community Strategy should be made more central to our decision-making processes, especially those involving Members. We will develop Performance Indicators that connect more closely with the aims of the Community Strategy, with the priorities of the Strategy made suitably explicit in our business planning.

We are finding ways to break down and banish silo thinking. We are introducing the EFQM Excellence Model into our service planning to ensure that quality issues are recognised as the business of all. We have restructured services so that they can work better together. And we are using e-government as one of the ways in which we can "join up" services. (See Trees case study).

Case Study | TREES (Tree Records Electronic Enquiry Service)

There are over 12,000 places in Woking where you can find protected trees, but with records stretching back over 40 years, 24 conservation areas and over 600 tree preservation orders in place, locating them can be time consuming.

Customers told us they wanted an efficient way of finding out which trees were protected. So we developed TREES - the Tree Records Electronic Enquiry Service.

This web-based service, linked to the Council's properties database, provides residents, local architects, developers and other professionals with up-to-date information about trees protected by tree preservation orders and conservation areas. It is easy to operate, needing only an address or a postcode to be able to pinpoint particular trees, contains a list of frequently asked questions and links to a wide range of other information and services. It is updated automatically every night.

With a new, simple, electronic system in place, officers who had previously been kept busy searching for records on behalf of customers have been freed up to provide a better face to face advice service. Other councils are now copying the system.

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

Best Value has taught us much about joint working. We are gaining experience in areas such as joint provision of services and partnership arrangements. We have developed some skill in negotiating (and joining up) contracts. The environmental maintenance contract with SERCO, for example, has brought in multi skilled and specialist teams to carry out environmental maintenance work (street cleaning, grass cutting etc) under one contract. The project was set up in response to a Best Value inspection that said that Woking's waste management services were "fair but unlikely to improve". We are now aiming to be ranked in the top 10% of authorities for street cleaning. Woking is one of the first authorities in the UK to successfully set up a joint contract of this type. The ODPM is considering including this scheme in its forthcoming guidance to local authorities on procurement.

There has been a great deal of organisational and constitutional change. We recognise that staff can quickly become jaded with change overload. We are addressing this through training and development. We have an internal communications strategy (launched 2002) which has introduced a new team briefing system and a staff panel to encourage staff feedback and involvement.

We are now facing the following important challenges ...

Improving customer service

We already have a good track record in developing services to meet customer needs, but there is more we want to do. In particular we want to use information technology to open up the Council, making our services better, easier to access, and more efficient, designed with the needs of the customer in mind rather than the needs of the individual services. We are enhancing our web service with new content management facilities and improved features for the customer. We are improving or replacing all of our service systems to facilitate direct public access through the web. These, together with the rest of our plans for e-government, are detailed in our IEG Strategy.

We are collecting information from our customers to help us determine the best ways of providing wider access to our services. This work will lead to the development of a contact management system that will allow us to tailor services to individual needs (for example, providing information in the customer's preferred language). We will also be able to feed targeted, up-to-date and relevant information to customers about issues that are of interest to them in ways that the customer prefers (for example, via the internet).

Driving up quality

We intend to continue to use performance indicators to help us monitor and improve our services, including the key performance indicators that link to the Community Strategy. We have shown that early intervention triggered by the Green Book reporting system is highly effective in tackling falling performance. However, more needs to be done to improve performance in some of our Housing services to bring them into the top quartile. A new IT system is being implemented to

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

enhance performance management, a partnership contract is being procured to improve repairs and training, and team development has been undertaken to improve rent collection. Further work is yet to be done to improve the advice services.

Working in partnership

We now have a bank of experience of different sorts of partnership working and we intend to use this experience to develop new partnerships and improve existing ones. In particular, we need to learn how NOT to always take the lead and to empower others to play their role.

We know that more work is needed to make the LSP partnership properly accountable to the community and are looking at ways we can interact with sub groups to inform all we do. We want the Community Strategy to be seen as the responsibility of the many community groups who are signed up in helping to achieve its aims, rather than it simply being the product of Woking Borough Council. We are investigating how best we can develop relationships and skills amongst our Community Strategy partners to achieve better collaborative working. We are keen to ensure that as many groups as possible can take part in new twice-yearly Woking LSP Conferences.

We have also learned a great deal from working with commercial partners. The SERCO grounds maintenance contract, for example, is built on flexibility and collaboration. We intend to adopt this approach with other commercial partners in future.

Although we have not always seen eye to eye, there are some good examples of collaboration with Surrey County Council. Our executive teams have met to consider opportunities for joint

working. We participate in the County's Local Transport Committee and work together to reach agreement on housing provision in the Borough. Surrey has acted as a critical friend on this assessment and we are delighted that Surrey's new County Hall is expected to be built in Woking. We will continue to develop good relationships with the County Council to achieve the best outcome for Woking.

Thinking innovatively

We value our reputation as a leading energy efficient local authority and want to stay out in front. Our recently published Climate Change Strategy commits us to a range of challenging targets that require us to be innovative and forward thinking. We also need to find sustainable ways to meet the demand for development (and especially affordable housing) in the Borough. We will continue to test new technologies in waste treatment and energy generation.

Building community and Council capacity

The move to new forms of local government, the drive for democratic renewal and the greater emphasis on community leadership demand that we find better, sometimes different, ways of engaging with our local communities - especially those who are marginalised or unheard. We have learnt much about community development from our successful Single Regeneration Budget programme. We have led by example in a number of cases and then encouraged others to carry on our work (our initiative for the Town Centre, the annual fireworks display and the Woking Beer

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

Festival are illustrations of this approach). These cases illustrate the point that, at a time of changing priorities, capacity can be found and good practice disseminated through private and community partnerships. However, we recognise that we need to do a lot more to build the capacity of various groups and individuals in Woking to work alongside the Council and to help the voluntary sector become stronger. Where we can, we will ask our private sector partners to help us with this aim. We have commissioned an external communications review which among other things will address how we communicate with 'hard to reach groups'.

Attracting and keeping the best staff

As for many other local authorities in the area, attracting and keeping competent and enthusiastic staff is a key challenge, alongside making sure our workforce is more representative of the communities we serve. We know that people with a disability and from ethnic minority groups are under-represented, and our People Strategy has been developed to address these issues.

We are also looking at the provision of key worker housing (a theme of the Surrey PSA Partnership) and investigating whether some posts can be shared with other statutory bodies. Our Integrated Services Manager, for example, is a three-way post with the County Council and the Primary Care Trust.

Being inclusive

We want our Council to be seen as fair, accountable and relevant to everybody we serve. We will continue to work with partners

to overcome exclusion, for example through the Surrey-wide PSA partnership dealing with social exclusion. Our values statement makes clear our commitment to equality and diversity, and our customer code makes explicit our approach to courtesy and service. Surrey Equality Partnership has noted our Race Equality Scheme as a model of best practice: we acknowledge we must now test ourselves against it.

Continuous challenge

Woking is a learning organisation. We are not afraid to challenge ourselves, or to ask others to do it for us! We had our first peer challenge by the I&DeA in 2001. The follow up to this visit came in January 2003, when inspectors found that we had taken forward the recommendations they had made.

We do not see the CPA inspection as a one-off process. We will continue to invite challenge from others as appropriate, and to harness the learning and experience of others (via, for example, Beacon Councils, I&DeA Knowledge, the Audit Commission etc.) to help us improve.

We want to be the best Council we can, and while we may find the categorisation of such a complex organisation into one word problematic, we are very sure that our aim has always been, and will continue to be, **to strive for excellence through innovation.**

WOKING BOROUGH COUNCIL

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